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ABSTRACT

In this report, the role of women's community education in combating poverty and disadvantage in Ireland over the past 10 years was examined, and future directions for policy and practice were suggested. The following data collection approaches were used: literature and policy document reviews; case studies involving regional workshops with participants and providers of women's community-based education in five areas across Ireland and a survey of the 91 workshop participants; structured interviews with key policymakers; and consultation with a research advisory group. The study confirmed that thousands of disadvantaged Irish women benefit from community-based educational opportunities each year. Underresourcing of appropriate support services and a lack of personal confidence and experience linked to women's traditional domestic roles/responsibilities and wider cultural attitudes were identified as the main barriers to women's participation in community education. The eight study recommendations included calls for providing the core funding required to give women's community-based education the continuity and security essential for service delivery and to develop comprehensive systems of supports for women learners and for women's community education groups and networks. Appendixes contain a list of project research team members and selected field work materials, including the interview questions, paper questionnaire, and focus group questions. (Contains 60 references.)(MN)

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At the Forefront

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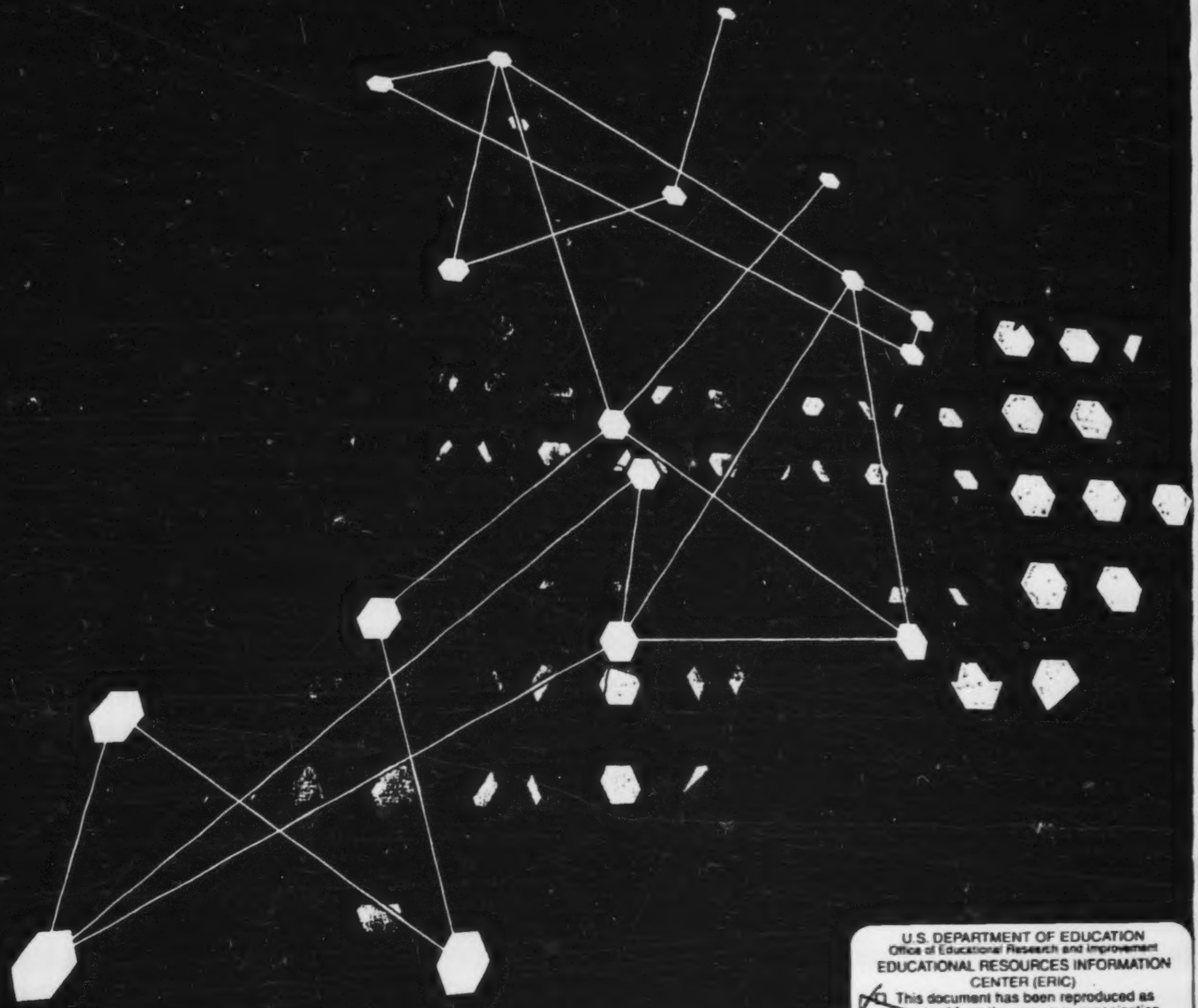

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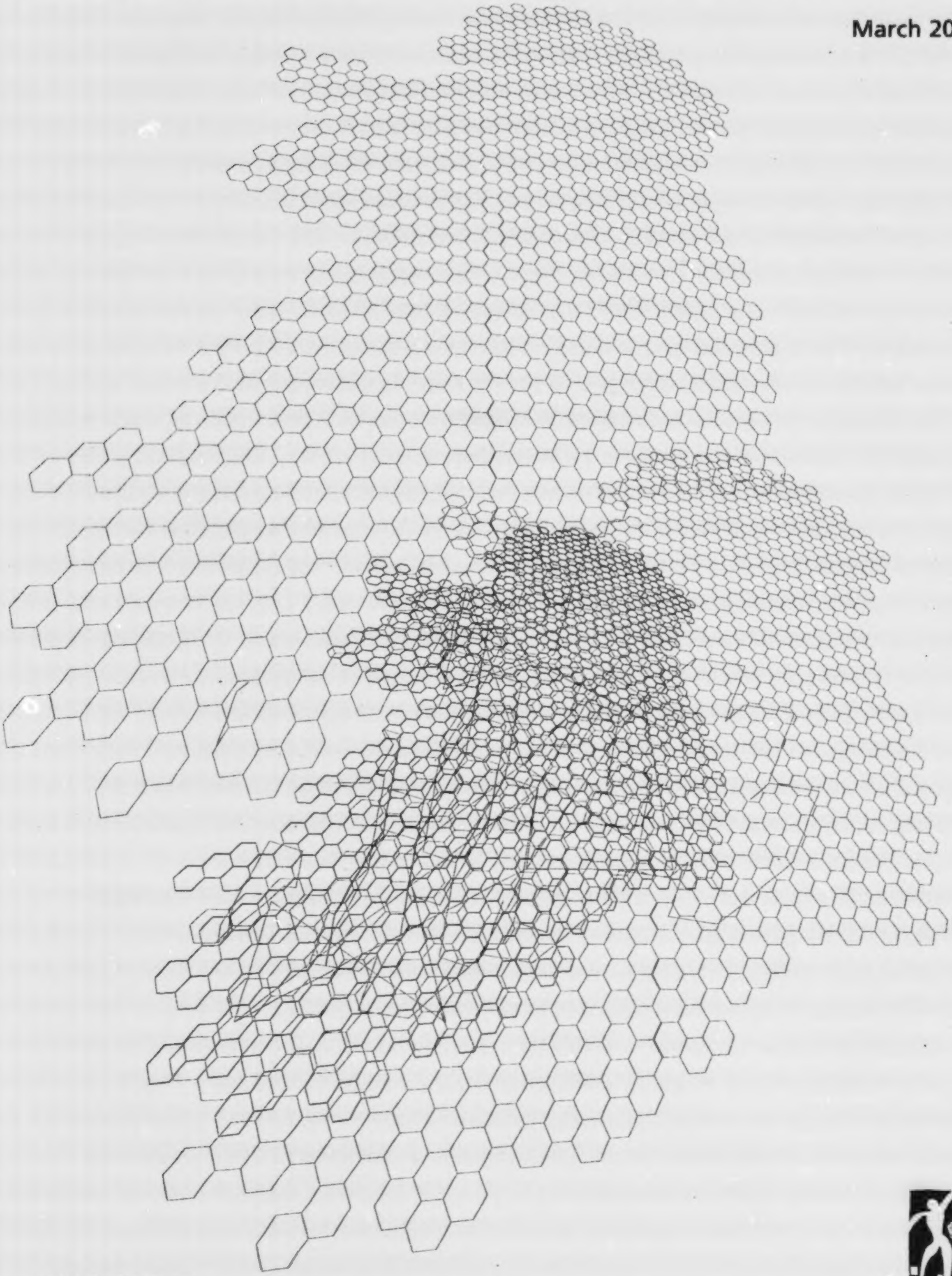

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INTRODUCTION

AONTAS is the Irish National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. Over thirty years in existence, it comprises a diverse membership drawn from the Statutory, Community and Voluntary sectors. AONTAS recognises the key political role adult education plays in combating poverty and inequality, as well as in promoting democracy, creativity and economic development. It thus exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education that is accessible to and inclusive of all.

During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, AONTAS experienced a rapid influx into its membership of groups from the Voluntary and Community Education sector. The large majority of these groups were run by women, and saw membership of AONTAS as a means of gaining recognition and support for their developmental work within disadvantaged communities. AONTAS responded by working directly with women's groups first through two major European-funded projects under the Employment Initiative NOW (New Opportunities for Women), and subsequently through the WENDI project (Women's Education Networks Development Initiative), funded by the Department of Education and Science's Women's Education Initiative (WEI).

The experience of working with disadvantaged and marginalised women over many years, and the successful outcomes of both the NOW and WENDI projects prompted AONTAS to initiate a more detailed study of the role of women's community-based education in combating poverty and disadvantage.

Community education plays a role which has traditionally been undervalued and under-resourced in combating disadvantage, poverty and social exclusion. Women's community education has gone through an important period of expansion and development in Ireland since the mid-1980s. The overwhelming majority of those engaged in all forms of adult education are women.

Locally-based women's groups, at times in partnership with other organisations (e.g. Area-Based Partnership Companies, WERRC, Pavee Point, Irish Countrywomen's Association and others) and sometimes supported by the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) have made, and continue to make, a key contribution to addressing social and economic disadvantage. Women who were marginalised and excluded from educational and training opportunities in the past have been able to avail of new opportunities to access education in their communities.

Women return to education for a wide variety of reasons and from a broad background of circumstances and experiences. Women's experiences of the realities of poverty and disadvantage mean that educational opportunities are particularly vital and that those opportunities need to take into account their specific needs and circumstances. The roles and responsibilities which women carry generally, together with the pressures and constraints of living in poverty, necessitate an approach to community education which is informed by a feminist perspective grounded in an understanding of inequality and disadvantage. Where educational opportunities are provided in a flexible and locally-based context, there has been a huge demand by women to avail of such opportunities.

Women's community education can enhance the position of women individually and collectively by :

- strengthening women's sense of personal identity and motivation
- developing new skills
- increasing understanding of social systems and structures
- providing opportunities for attaining new educational qualifications
- developing a sense of community or collective identity
- challenging structural and other aspects of inequality, poverty and disadvantage

In the context of the recently published White Paper on Adult Education (2000) and increasing policy development in the sector, it is essential that the importance, level and nature of the contribution of women's community-based education to combating poverty and disadvantage be recognised and understood.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aims of this research are to:

- Assess the contribution of women's community-based education to women's personal and economic development, and their participation in civil society.
- Identify developments that have empowered women collectively and individually to challenge inequalities and discrimination.
- Highlight the impact this work has had on women's capacity to participate in decision-making.
- Make recommendations that will contribute to policy formation and implementation from a gender perspective.
- Make recommendations based on the findings, for mainstreaming best practice in this area in order to promote and develop social inclusion.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The specific objectives of this research are to:

- Critically review the participation of women in community-based education over the last ten years in Ireland.
- Carry out a literature review focusing on the role of community-based women's education in combating poverty and disadvantage.

- Examine current policies affecting the level and nature of participation of women in, and the provision of, community-based women's education.
- Explore women's experience of community-based women's education, including barriers to and supports needed for increased participation.
- Identify the strategies and policies of specific relevant agencies with respect to women's community-based education.
- Highlight models of good practice in the area of women's community-based education.
- Propose specific strategies aimed at enhancing women's community-based education provision and practices.
- Disseminate the findings among women's groups, appropriate voluntary and statutory agencies, policy-makers and other relevant individuals and organisations.

METHODOLOGY

This research involved the use of a combination of approaches:

1. Documentary Research

This aspect of the research involved a review of relevant specialised literature on women's community-based education as well as a range of Irish policy documents and other literature, including both the Green and White Papers on Adult Education, VEC policy documents, evaluation of the Local Development Programme, AONTAS reports and research, evaluations of NOW projects, and Women's Education Initiative projects, recent policy research and analysis.

2. Case Studies

A number of regional workshops with participants and providers of women's community-based education projects aimed at documenting their experiences and developing perspectives on policy change were held during May and June 2000. Five different areas or centres were selected (Donegal, West Dublin, Waterford City, Longford Town and Kerry) involving eight different groups or networks. Workshops took place with participants and providers in each of the selected groups or networks, bringing together small groups of women in a wide range of circumstances (age, educational background, care responsibilities, employment situation etc) in the different geographical areas. Discussion focused on a number of key themes with respect to the nature and level of women's participation in women's community-based education eg: access to, experience and impact of women's community-based education, structures and supports for women's community-based education, barriers to participation and priorities for change.

Workshop participants (ninety-one in total) also completed brief questionnaires comprising personal details and a number of key questions on their reasons for involvement in women's community-based education, their wider community involvement and the impact of their participation on themselves as individuals as well as on their immediate communities.

Interviews with Adult Education Organisers (AEOs), staff of Partnership Companies responsible for educational activities and others involved in adult and community education in the selected areas were also carried out.

3. Structured Interviews with Policy-Makers

A number of semi-structured interviews with key policy-makers in agencies involved in both the policy towards and the practice of community-based education in both urban and rural contexts were carried out. The interviews were aimed at achieving an overview of key agencies' current policy perspectives on women's community-based education at national level and their priorities for the future.

4. Consultation with AONTAS Research Advisory Group

As part of the research process, consultation sessions with AONTAS Research Advisory Group were held in order to refine the terms of reference of the research, to feed into the research itself, to facilitate the setting up of regional workshops and interviews and to contribute to the formulation of priority recommendations.

THE REPORT STRUCTURE

Key theoretical and empirical issues relating to poverty and disadvantage in the context of women's community education are discussed in Chapter One.

Chapter Two outlines the history and development of women's community-based education in Ireland, followed by discussion of estimated participation rates in the sector. The chapter concludes with a discussion of policy frameworks and the perspectives of key agencies.

Chapter Three presents the fieldwork findings from five case study regions, focussing on eight women's community-based groups and networks, and interviews with representatives of local support agencies.

Conclusions and recommendations arising from the study are presented in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER ONE

Women's Community-Based Education: Theory and Practice

INTRODUCTION

In this vibrant tiger economy it can be difficult to remember what life was like before the boom. Take cars for instance, now we hear stories of how when buying a new car, people have to wait a few months because they want a particular type, or colour. Although they often fulfil vital transport needs, cars are increasingly a major status symbol in Irish society, separating those who have, or who have most, from those who have not, or who have least. In 1985 when times were hard, approximately 60,000 new cars were purchased. In 1999, this figure had increased to over 170,000 – almost three times more. The late 1980s were a time of fewer cars and also a time of unemployment and depression. Cutbacks in vital services like health and education had a serious impact on most of the population. They hit hardest on those most vulnerable groups in society and communities, who faced multiple social problems, including poor housing, drug abuse, and unemployment.

Nonetheless, special seeds grow on hard rock and it was this time of necessity that mothered community education. It was a very unique development in Ireland, growing from the ground up. In its policy document on Community Education AONTAS describes how locally-based adult education was typically initiated by one or two people, primarily women, and supported by key people in a variety of agencies, Adult Education Organisers, priests, and health education officers, among others. (AONTAS 2000) As the case studies in Chapter 3 illustrate, the support of key individuals, as opposed to particular agencies, is crucial to the development of community education. The involvement by learners themselves in their own learning is a key feature of community education and is undoubtedly one of its strengths.

However, it is important to point out that unlike other forms of education, participation rates between men and women differ vastly, with an estimated 80% of community education participants being women. In the 1980s community education was primarily described as daytime education, and sometimes as women's education. Whichever term is used the reality is that community education is predominantly run by women for women, although there have been some developments in men's education more recently. Perhaps at this stage it would be useful to consider the definition offered by AONTAS in its policy document on community education:

> Community Education is a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within the community. It is distinct from general adult education provision, due both to its ethos and to its methodologies.
>
> AONTAS 2000

This definition reflects the capacity of community education to help people tackle the multiplicity of problems they face, whether of health care, unemployment, drugs, housing or other social problems.

Community education is characterised by a range of features (AONTAS ibid.):

- it is a learning environment
- it is located in the community
- it provides community-identified programmes
- control remains in the hands of the local community
- pedagogical approaches are rooted in emancipatory, humanistic values
- it maintains that people are capable of reaching their potential, through growth and development
- participants' own lived experience is valued as the basis for learning
- intended outcomes are twofold but interconnected:
    - personal acquisition of skills, knowledge and further directions
    - social and community empowerment and advancement

Community education differs from traditional adult education in that it is located physically in a community whether the community is geographic or sectoral such as lone parents, travellers, old people, refugees and so on. Importantly it also differs in its ethos and methodologies. Community education adopts a person-centered approach as opposed to the classic 'chalk and talk' approach of mainstream education which centres all power, knowledge and status in the teacher. This transference of power from teacher to learner is clearly seen in the role of the voluntary management committees who by and large are adult learners themselves. Following a process of consultation and feedback from the adult learners themselves, the voluntary management committee decides on the content and process of the learning and selects tutors and facilitators. It is their closeness to the learner that gives the voluntary management committees the edge in attracting and retaining people who have been failed by the education system elsewhere.

Community education values each learner's experience and recognises their support needs, both educational, personal and resource-wise. A clarion cry of daytime education groups since their inception in the 1980s was 'no crèche, no class'. It is this recognition that learning has to be supported by childcare as well as funding, transport or literacy supports that makes community education so successful at retaining learners. Active participation is another key feature of community education. This manifests itself in small group or pair work and a high level of dialogue and discussion. AONTAS (ibid.) describes the impacts of this approach as two-pronged, with outcomes at both personal and collective levels:

Personal Outcomes

- Confidence and self-esteem
- Motivation
- Increased expectations
- Skills
- Choices
- New Opportunities

Collective Outcomes

- Mutual support
- Opportunities to influence decision-making
- Ability to organise for personal and group development
- Tackling community issues

AONTAS points to Ireland's recent economic success and notes that if this level of success is to continue, poverty and social exclusion need to be tackled. It argues that the cohesion of society and its very stability are threatened by the continuing existence of serious economic and social divisions. Indeed the White Paper on Adult Education (2000:113) recognises the importance of community education as an empowerment process and its role in 'the promotion of a participative democracy'. By providing an access point to those adults marginalised by Irish society, community education allows them to grow and develop so that they can become agents of their own social, economic and political transformation. It is this ability to engage effectively with educationally disadvantaged adults that makes community education such a valuable educational strategy. Particularly in a society where the ability to learn is crucial, both in relation to the changing roles of men and women, and in relation to the knowledge economy, community education indeed holds 'great promise' (ibid.).

In a recent article on the future of employment (*The Irish Times*, 3/8/2000) Willie O'Dea, Minister of State with responsibility for Adult Education argues that the concept of security of employability through ready and continuing access to skills training must replace the traditional concept of security of employment. He signals the need for a critical departure from the traditional role of educational institutions with learning taking place in a range of settings.

Community education has been to the fore in developing learning environments outside of traditional educational settings. It has also been to the fore in developing new methodologies which specifically suit adult learning. It is community education's capacity to value the everyday experience of each individual woman or man and to build on the common experience of the group that has made it so valuable. However, as Connolly (1997:44) points out, there is a danger of remaining in the personal if community education rests the responsibility for change in the personal arena and cannot make the link with collective action. She argues that unless community education and community development have a specific gender dimension they are 'doomed to reproduce the status quo'. This is a vital issue for women.

The White Paper on Adult Education (2000:111) quotes Smyth, for whom feminist education is 'where women decide what they need to know and how they want to use that knowledge'. It embodies:

- an openness to alternative structures and a critique of existing ones
- an emphasis on sharing in learning rather than competing in it
- a blurring of distinctions between the 'teacher' and the 'taught'
- an endeavour to locate personal, individual experience within the broader social and political context
- the elimination of hierarchy
- an orientation to enhanced educational and vocational progression for participants
- a challenge to the dominant modes of assessment and accreditation.

Community education has proved to be a crucial space for women to explore their own experience. As Healy (1996:36) states, it can contribute to the process of making women's experience visible but must actively empower women to identify the barriers which exclude them from full citizenship. She identifies the characteristics and good practices of feminist/women's community based education. These are:

- a woman-centred agenda
- community development principles and processes
- identifying and exploring community needs
- grounded in and attracting participation in community development
- promoting a sense of community identity
- providing opportunities for social inclusion
- providing opportunities for development of self-esteem
- contributing to building organisational capacity
- strengthening solidarity networks

These principles and practices support women to explore their lived experience and to work collectively on achieving full and equal participation in Irish society. It is this emphasis on *collective* action that is often missing from women's community-based education. Women experience multiple forms of disadvantage. Identifying and naming them is only the first step towards eliminating them. Even this first step can be difficult as the formation of the State defined a limited role for women and so the traditional view of women has deep roots in Irish society. As Mulvey (1992:2) points out, the Irish Constitution 'enshrines a narrow and limited view of the role of women which decrees that, as mothers, their role be home based, dependent and centred on the service of others'. Mulvey identifies the consequences of this narrow prescription as economic dependency and poverty as well as cultural and political marginalisation. This is not to argue that women should not undertake the traditional tasks of caring and housework. However, it is important to consider the consequences of a narrow and prescriptive role for women.

The consequences outlined by Mulvey - economic dependency, poverty, cultural and political marginalisation - impact on all women. However, they impact most sharply on women experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage such as women with disabilities, lesbians, working class women, traveller and other ethnic or racial minority women, and other marginalised or vulnerable groups. In their study of women and poverty, Nolan and Watson, 1999 conclude that women experience a greater risk of poverty than men, in particular lone parents and older women. However it is important to bear in mind that the basis of their study, the 1994 Living in Ireland Survey, did not include women outside private households. These are the very women who would be among the most vulnerable groups in society: women in refuges, travellers, homeless women and women in institutional care. Women also form the majority of welfare claimants and are therefore economically dependent upon the State. When women are economically active they are also the group most likely to be in receipt of low pay and in insecure jobs.

DEFINITIONS OF POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE

The purpose of this study is to research the role of community-based women's education in combating poverty and disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland. To do this, it is important to set down a clear definition of poverty and disadvantage. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) definition (CPA, 1999:2) states that:

> People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living that is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities that are considered the norm for other people.
>
> (Combat Povery Agency (CPA), 1999: 2)

While this definition is useful, it leaves a number of questions unanswered, primarily:

- What is acceptable to Irish society?
- What are the activities considered the norm for some, from which others are excluded and marginalised?
- Is poverty different for women than for men?

In considering disadvantage, a diffuse and multi-dimensional concept, the picture complicates further. Thompson (1997:3) suggests that overuse of words like disadvantage has had the effect of 'lumping' together a range of complicated processes into a form of shorthand. In their analysis of cross-border deprivation Pringle, Cook, Pool & Moore (2000:3) point out that poverty, deprivation, social exclusion, and indeed disadvantage, are terms which are regularly interchanged. Whichever terminology is used, the process being considered is where an individual is placed at a disadvantage in society, and her or his ability to participate fully in social, economic and political activities is diminished. This may be because of gender, social class, employment status, educational background, health, ability, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any combination of these factors. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy identifies educational disadvantage and unemployment as key factors in causing poverty and sees the need to specifically target these twin causal factors as crucial to eliminating poverty. The Combat Poverty Agency (ibid.) sees the cause of poverty as an unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunities within society. Therefore, actions which seek to redistribute power, resources and opportunities will be part of the strategy to combat poverty and disadvantage. Since the late 1940s the United Nations has seen community development as a process of bringing social, economic and cultural change (Connolly 1997:42) and community education is an integral part of community development. More recently the UN has emphasised the need to resource women's education and training at community level as one of the most effective ways of improving the well-being of those communities.

However, Thompson (1997:7) outlines a number of responses developed in the UK in the 1970s based on the premise that a 'community solution' can tackle the problems of structural poverty. She raises the key question as to whether those who have least power can ever successfully dismantle the structures which render them powerless, voiceless and invisible in the first place. Powell (1998:36) quotes one interviewee, Sean Healy, as observing that:

> When you are one of the excluded, politicians and policy-makers can ignore you without fear of censure or loss of position. If your rights are infringed, the avenues of redress are very few and haphazard. Since society fears excluded groups, you are always suspect – guilty until proven innocent.

Therefore, the challenge facing women experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and facing the agencies and organisations that support them, is immense. This raises a further question: if powerless, voiceless and invisible women do not transform themselves into powerful, visible women with a strong collective voice, who will? The task is daunting and the particular challenges of social, economic and political disadvantage are considered in the following three sections. These explore some of the issues involved under each separate, and often overlapping, area of disadvantage.

CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

McMinn & O'Meara (WEFT 2000) define social disadvantage as 'inequality of respect and recognition' which results in low self-esteem and lack of confidence. In their socially prescribed roles of wife and mother, McGivney (1999:15) argues that women pay a 'status penalty' for their work in these roles. This is further reinforced for Irish women by the narrow constitutional role described by Mulvey earlier. McGivney says

> Although caring and homemaking are constantly extolled as women's natural and primary roles, those who perform these duties receive little social and economic support: ...They also incur a 'status penalty' since society neither values nor rewards women's unpaid work in home management and child-rearing and there is still little recognition of the skills involved in these complex tasks.

This results in psychological barriers such as low aspirations and expectations and a loss of confidence which disadvantages 'women returners' in particular when they want to undertake education or training. The forces which undermine women's confidence can begin early in life. Community education practitioners are familiar with the commonly voiced experience of 'educationally disadvantaged' adults who describe their schooling as very negative. The following quotes from a study of two Family Centres (Rath 1999:51) are powerful illustrations of how school did not even allow a 'first chance' at education but was instead a place that inhibited development:

> *I was treated in the primary as the girl who had no mind*
>
> *I became totally silent...*
>
> *I still hear a voice that says get back to your place...*

Less often voiced is the experience that home too can be a very negative experience. In Rath's study (ibid.) almost all the participants identified both school and home as very damaging, violent places. Tutors working in the area of women's education regularly uncover stories of violence and sexual assault in women's essays. The innovative Women's Education Initiative funded one project which specifically addressed the needs of abused women in a refuge setting. However, such a specific educational response is unique. The experience of violence is often ignored but will continue to surface wherever women feel they are safe and their stories will be heard and understood. With approximately 20% of Irish women experiencing violence in personal relationships (Task Force Report, 1997:27) the issue is commonplace and will have affected two or three women within any average-sized group of twelve to fifteen participants. Small wonder that Rath (ibid.) found that the participants in her study saw themselves as 'voiceless, invisible and unworthy'. Small wonder also that in their review of grants to locally-based women's groups by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, Mulvey and Dolphin (1997:31) discovered that 'consistently across all the years of the Scheme' personal development was the largest area of work at 40% of the total. More recent research (Kellehers, 1999) revealed in a review of projects funded under the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs that personal development was undertaken by 80% of the projects.

Indeed for many women coming to a local women's education group, they are taking the first step from a bedrock of negativity towards the beginning of their own transformation. This step is like a pebble in the pond affecting not only the women themselves but also their immediate and extended families and their communities. For in providing personal development, alongside an array of courses such as creative writing and women's studies, women's community-based education offers a unique space for women to examine their lives and to share their histories. Rath (ibid.) is emphatic that access to dialogue was identified by the women in her research as central to their transformation. She states that the opportunity to share their stories, not just the content of the courses they followed, was the empowering process. Thompson (1999) in her examination of the Rosemount Resource Centre in Derry develops the issue of 'women stories' even further:

> They are the spaces within which women still have the chance to make their own history and can begin to renegotiate the terms and conditions of their relationships and their lives; especially when they have spoken 'out loud' about their feelings, their concerns and their priorities in the company of others with whom they share experiences, solidarities and understandings.

Thompson (ibid.) regards this process as political activity, which challenges 'the traditional, the official, the patriarchal, the privileged and the academic view of things'. It is this core work of providing a point of contact and an opportunity to share their stories and experiences that supports women to move from where they are currently to where they want to be. Barr makes a significant point when she argues that:

> Starting from where people are is an excellent starting point but a lousy finishing point! It can too often leave them there. We must devise a pedagogy and research methodology that encourages learning which is related to people's lived experiences and feelings and which develops critical thinking – so that new thoughts and new ideas can be generated (Barr, 1999)

Thompson (ibid.) makes a related point that education will only empower women if it enables them to act collectively. Indeed this is one of the major challenges facing the anti-poverty movement: how to move communities and not just individuals. Rath (ibid.) points out that for the women in her study their ambition was not 'moving up and out' of their communities. They wanted to translate their personal empowerment into their communities:

> If what people say is achievement is going up the ladder and achieve[ing] academically or [to] be in a higher position above… I don't want to go up that ladder. It's not lack of ambition because I am very ambitious about things I do in my community.

During the consultation process for the Alternative Report for Ireland: Beijing +5, one woman is quoted as saying that women are entitled to learn as human beings. It is important to attend to this point but also to realise that no woman is an island. Women's education has an impact which significantly benefits not only the individual woman, but her family environment and broader community. The wide-reaching benefits of women's education were recognised by the Report by Department of Education and Combat Poverty Agency on *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* (1995) which noted that:

> [E]ach parent is likely to have a distinct influence on children. The characteristics of mothers (including their schooling experience) seem particularly important in structuring the educational environment of the home and research findings indicate that children of poorly educated mothers do not do as well at school and leave school earlier than children of better educated mothers.

The recent P2000 Working Group Report on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000:74) similarly identified the wider familial and social impact of enhancing women's educational opportunities:

> [I]n order to prevent not just women's unemployment but a cycle of deprivation where the children of low skilled, poorly educated parents become the unskilled and long term unemployed of the future, an investment of resources in women's education must be a priority.

CHALLENGE OF ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

Women are economically active whether in unpaid work in the home, as volunteer workers in their community, or as part of the labour force. The Alternative Report for Ireland: Beijing +5 (2000:18) recommends that women's unpaid work must be recognised and valued by setting up National Household Satellite accounts that measure women's unpaid work in the home and the community. The Combat Povety Agency *Factsheet on Poverty* (CPA, 1999) states that information on women in poverty is difficult to obtain due to examination of income at household level. There is an assumption that disposable income is *fairly* (author's italics) shared between men and women within households. The household theory is critiqued by Cantillon (1997:211) who concludes that the family is a unit with a hierarchy and that divisions by sex within the family household are not just differences but inequalities. The need to undertake research into women's poverty is one of the key recommendations of the Alternative Report for Ireland: Beijing + 5. In his study on income distribution, Rottman (undated) finds that women have the greatest say where there are least resources, that is, in low-income households. He also points out that while the role of income provider is one responsibility:

> [M]anaging a household budget is arguably more important in terms of quality of life experienced by individual family members. Responsibility for financial management is also likely to be stressful especially in households with low incomes or in which income is inadequate relative to family needs.

Keeping a tight control over the household budget where there are inadequate resources has a negative impact on women and erodes their self-esteem. O'Neill's (1992) work on the experience of poverty highlights this issue:

> *The business of watching the food makes me feel mean.*

This is not the sort of role which enhances women's sense of confidence and self worth.

In its factsheet on poverty, Combat Poverty Agency identifies households headed by an unemployed person as the biggest group in poverty (1999). The 1994 Living in Ireland Survey indicated that households headed by women are at a substantially higher risk of poverty than those headed by men or by couples. Government policy sees employment as the solution to poverty and the reduction of unemployment levels is a key objective of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. Therefore, as Nolan & Watson (1999) state, the extent and nature of women's participation in the paid labour force is of crucial importance for women and poverty. Women have moved from a traditionally low participation rate in the labour force to a rate of 44% in 1998 (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs 2000: 22). Male participation rates for the same year are 69.4%. Following ten years' experience as the NOW Support Structure, the *50/50 Vision Report* (1999) sees women as an underestimated labour supply. The ESRI forecasts that the rise in female labour participation rates will account for over 25% of the increase in the labour supply over the next fifteen years (Higher Education Authority, 1999:40).

The increase in women's participation in the labour force has come about as a result of a growth in the services sector and in part-time employment. Both are typified by a higher representation of women than men. However, greater involvement in the labour force has not led to equality of income for women. Nolan & Watson (ibid.) quoting the 1994 ESRI survey state that 54% of women were earning below 66% of median hourly earnings. They state that it is women of 25 years and over, and particularly women of 35 years and over, who are at a much higher risk of being in low-paid employment. They add that:

> From the poverty perspective, however, it is the concentration of women in low-paid employment rather than the male-female wage gap along the entire spectrum of pay rates that is of primary importance.

McGivney (ibid.) states that the majority of women outside the labour market for family reasons intend eventually to seek paid employment and that women returners in the UK account for 33% of the labour force. She points out that despite the fact that a majority of women now return to the labour market after breaks for childbirth and caring responsibilities, the re-entry process is not always straightforward. She identifies a range of barriers and problems:

- lack of childcare
- lack of information, advice and practical help
- loss of contact with the labour market
- downward mobility
- lack of recognition of existing experience and skills
- limited training opportunities
- lack of support during the re-entry process

McGivney (ibid.) identifies 'downward mobility' as a particularly important concern for women returners:

> Analysis suggest that at least 30% of those who return to work part-time are forced to take jobs at a lower level than they had before they withdrew from the labour market.

She warns that the increasing 'feminisation' of the workforce has increased gender disparities in the labour market. In her 1995 study Mulvey identified similar difficulties notably lack of information and advice as the most frequently named difficulty for women seeking paid work. Mulvey also identified childcare and the absence of appropriate training delivery mechanisms as key barriers.

If these are some of the main issues and challenges facing women seeking access to paid work, what then is the role of women's community-based education in facilitating women's entry/re-entry to the labour market, and particularly what is its role in combating 'downward mobility'? The link between educational levels among women and their participation in the labour force is very substantial (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs 2000) and the elimination of educational disadvantage is a key objective of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. This is a key issue for women with lower levels of educational qualifications. The Department's Report (ibid.) cites an example of women with junior cycle qualifications having a labour force participation rate that is 36% below that of men with a similar level. of education. For adults aged between 35 and 44 in 1996 only 54% have completed at least upper secondary education (Higher Education Authority, 1999:23). The P2000 Report (ibid.) criticises the lack of recognition of the value of women's community-based education and the absence of a system to accredit the wealth of experience and knowledge accumulated by women outside the formal mainstream training and education systems. McGivney (1999) points out that accreditation of prior learning and experience processes in the UK has demonstrated that the multiple skills women develop in their unpaid work can be accredited up to Level 3 of the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) framework .

The recent P2000 Report (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000) on women's access to labour market opportunities states that:

> Community education has enormous potential to address the critical needs of the most excluded women. Local women's education groups act as a first point of contact for women, particularly those in the home, who wish to widen their horizons, develop confidence and skills, gain qualifications and explore the possibility of returning to the workforce.

The Report makes the crucial point that for those women returning to education, current mainstream provision is initially 'a bridge too far' as it does not provide support for re-entry to education and training. McGivney (1999) argues that virtually all studies of women returners comment on their lack of confidence, low aspirations and expectations (see also WERRC, 1999). Therefore appropriate response mechanisms are needed to reach this group. Because women's community-based education is 'education for women run by women', it has developed expertise in reaching excluded groups.

In defining 'women–friendly training' McGivney (1999) says it must meet at least two of the following criteria:

- time & location appropriate to carers
- no cost barrier
- tutor/trainer with awareness of equal opportunities
- courses which include careers counselling and/or confidence building
- marketing/recruitment geared to women

If these criteria are applied to women's community-based education programmes, it is likely that more than two, if not all, of the above criteria would be met. Therefore it can be seen that women's community-based education has developed a delivery mechanism which needs to be supported and resourced. It also provides a model of good practice for mainstream providers.

With the new focus on women returners it is inevitable that the drive to involve women in the labour market will impact on community-based women's education. It is likely that there will be a reduced availability of volunteers for management committees. Another likely impact will be a refocusing of the timing of courses to target-women who are currently unavailable for morning classes because of their paid work. Work based learning is also likely to develop as the need for knowledge workers increases. The implications of this changing environment are difficult to assess at present as it has only begun to make an impact.

CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL DISADVANTAGE

Political disadvantage has been defined as 'inequality of power and representation' by McMinn and O'Meara (WEFT, 2000). In their findings on the nature of economic, social/cultural and political disadvantage experienced by individual women, they describe political disadvantage as being derived from:

- unequal power within the family, with some women reporting a restriction on their freedom of movement
- violence against women
- low levels of literacy
- low and/or poor representation of women and women's interests in decision-making.
- institutionalised racism whereby racist assumptions are built into statutory policies and/or provision
- lack of political voice for women, compounded by a sense of political peripherality with the border region seen as being remote from centres of decision-making.

These factors, they say, lead to the effective silencing of women and maintain their situation of powerlessness.

The sense of peripherality from centres of decision-making applies to women in all geographical locations and particularly to disadvantaged and marginalised women. In a forthcoming study for NIWEP/NWCI, the characteristics of a typical public appointee in Northern Ireland are identified:

67%	of appointees were male
62%	aged 45+
83%	married (although female members significantly more likely than males to be separated, divorced or widowed)
72%	educated to higher education level
72%	in full-time work
42%	in managerial posts
48%	in professional posts

Analysing women's roles in politics and decision-making, Thompson (1997:142) observes that 'the struggle for political power is being contested by individuals who seem to grow increasingly similar to each other': male, middle aged and middle class.

Although the Government adopted its 40:60 gender balance quota system for appointments to public bodies in the mid-1990s, the current statistics are sobering and confirm Thompson's observation. Men constitute the following proportions of a range of public and representative bodies:

72% of public bodies in the Republic of Ireland (NWCI, 1997)
68% of Partnership Board members
(ADM Conference Report, July 1999: 20)
82% of Chairs of Partnership Boards
(ADM Conference Report, July 1999: 20)
85% of local authority members
(Gardiner 1998 quoted in ADM Conference Report, July 1999: 41)
100% of County or City Managers or Assistant County or City Managers (Gardiner, 1998 quoted in ADM Conference Report, July 1999: 20)
95% of Secretaries General and 90% of Assistant Secretaries within the Civil Service (Humphreys, Drew & Murphy, 1999: 60&61)

The forthcoming NIWEP/NWCI report makes the point that when women are appointed to public bodies, it is to 'less prestigious or powerful agencies' and they are under-represented at the highest levels of power. This imbalance echoes a pattern identified earlier under economic disadvantage as seen in the research on income distribution within households. This research shows that women have the greatest say where there is least to control. An analysis of where senior women civil servants are situated within government structures shows a similar pattern. Humphreys, Drew & Murphy's (1999:50) research on the percentage of female staff at HEO grade and above in main Government Departments shows an under-representation of women in the Department of Finance at 26.4% and in the Department of the Taoiseach at 36.5%.

In WERRC's research on women and local development a detailed analysis of women's position in local decision making structures is provided (Barry and Gibney, forthcoming). The Report identifies strong and persistent barriers such as the lack of:

- support systems
- childcare
- money
- public transport

- flexible work arrangements
- training and educational programmes
- flexible meeting times

These barriers make it extremely difficult and sometimes impossible for women to consider positions within local politics and local development structures. This is particularly the case as local government continues to be dominated by a political party system within which women have been traditionally under-represented. The most striking pattern to emerge consistently from this analysis is the chronic under-representation of women across the entire range of local government and local development organisations. With a low representation rate of women of only 15% within local authorities, the consequences for women are profound as these authorities are feeder systems for other boards. In relation to education the low representation of women on Vocational Education Committeees (VECs) is a case in point.

WERRC's research reveals that existing power structures tend to exclude and marginalise women through perpetuation of male-centred networks, use of bureaucratic language, timing and structure of meetings, and through a lack of commitment to increasing women's representation and to focusing on issues of importance to women. The culture and organisation of decision-making systems can be intimidating as women face a predominantly male model of working with little recognition of the particular skills, styles and roles women bring to leadership (Barry and Gibney, forthcoming). However, within the community and voluntary sector women have initiated a range of self-help and needs based groups and organisations. Women have therefore developed their own ways of organising and operating.

Significantly, ADM (1999:20) has found that the Area-Based Partnerships are reliant on the community sector to provide gender balance. If as Lynam (ibid.) suggests, Local Development Partnerships are evolving into 'arenas of participatory democracy', it is not surprising that local development has become the preferred site for women's community activism and citizenship (Costello, 1999).

However, there is noticeable tension between the functioning of local development structures and of locally-based women's groups. Connolly (1997) found that locally-based women's groups operated mainly in working-class urban areas and had a localised impact. She describes them as being:

- non-hierarchical
- autonomous
- participatory
- empowering

In contrast, research findings consistently show that women's opportunities to develop leadership and decision-making skills are greatly diminished in mixed gender groupings, whether at local or national levels. Costello (1999 and 1997) noted that while women play a central role as 'primary movers and key agents' in local development groups in the major urban areas, gender roles remained highly traditional. She found that, for example, in the Cavan-Monaghan region almost 90% of community groups had male chairpersons and 66% of groups had female secretaries.

Such pervasive exclusion and the continuing male dominance of decision-making styles and cultures pose major problems for women generally, and for disadvantaged and marginalised women in particular. In this context, women's community-based education groups, which are 'run by women for women', present a unique and valuable opportunity for women to begin the major challenge of combating political disadvantage. Indeed these groups typically present the first opportunity for women to find their voice and to begin to consider and discuss politics:

> *There were people here, people who were ready to listen to you. People who weren't prejudiced. There was a variety of people coming in here. And they all have different opinions and I could listen to them. I could learn from some and let go of others.... And you could talk politics here. I don't talk politics to anybody at home. But here I learn. I keep my ears open. (Rath 1999:59)*

Discussing women's roles in multi-purpose community groups and area-based partnerships, Costello (1999) recommends that in order to overcome their 'invisibility' at leadership level, women need to engage in confidence building, leadership training and political analysis. Where women have had the opportunity to develop these skills the impact is significant. In an evaluative analysis of community-based women's studies courses, WERRC (1999) found that 80% of those interviewed mentioned that the course had raised their personal confidence. In an assessment of the POWER Programme (2000:17), participants reported an 81% increase in level of skill in decision making and developing policy. High scores were also returned for networking, lobbying, strategising and agenda-building .

The impact of this type of training is illustrated dramatically in an interview with Marian Flannery of Women of the North-West (*The Irish Times*, 5th June 2000). She recounted how, through her experience of talking to other women at the NGO Forum near Beijing five years ago, she picked up the idea of a leadership project:

> Five years ago there were six or seven women's groups in west Sligo and north Mayo, whereas now there are 25. Five years ago we did not have a dentist in Belmullet, and now we have a Western Health Board women's health plan, osteoporosis screening and, most recently an excellent conference in Westport on violence against women which was attended by all the official bodies.

CONCLUSION

Ireland has experienced unprecedented levels of growth in the past few years. However the challenge of poverty remains. The stark reality is that over 15% of the population is living in poverty and there is a functional illiteracy rate of 23% (Kellehers, 1999:5). Outside the USA, Ireland has the highest level of poverty in the industrialised world (ibid.).

The majority of the projects covered in the Kellehers' research comprised mainly women:

> Women have been to the forefront in developing locally based responses to combat disadvantage and exclusion. (Kellehers, 1999:2)

The depth of the challenges facing women in relation to social, economic and political disadvantage have been outlined above. Women experience social disadvantage and so face inequalities of respect and recognition. This is internalised as poor self-esteem which leads to isolation and to a lack of confidence and low aspirations and expectations:

> A lot of women are grinded down by poverty. The groups give women companionship and confidence. (Kellehers, 1999:52)

Community-based women's education directly tackles poor self-esteem by providing personal development courses. These courses are provided in a respectful and supportive learning environment where women can begin their first steps towards their future goals of education, training or paid work. These steps are crucial as the relationship between educational disadvantage and paid work is stronger for women than men (WEI, 2000:10). Whereas there are virtually equal numbers of educationally disadvantaged men employed full-time as those men classified as economically inactive, this is not the same for women. There are over six times more educationally disadvantaged women who are classified as economically inactive than are in full-time employment (ibid.). Community education plays a vital role in providing that crucial first point of contact that other providers have been unable to match. It has also developed expertise in providing the learning environment and methodology which allows excluded women to progress. Political disadvantage has been defined as an inequality of power and representation. As seen from the WERRC research women are chronically under-represented across the entire political spectrum. Mixed gender groupings have not facilitated women to develop leadership and decision-making skills. Women's community-based education presents a unique opportunity for women to develop these skills. The next chapter examines the policies which impact on women's community-based education and the new structures recommended by the White Paper on Adult Education which will provide a framework for the development of adult education in Ireland.

CHAPTER TWO

Evolution of Women's Community-Based Education in Ireland

INTRODUCTION

The commitment to lifelong learning in the National Development Plan, which is manifested in the recently published White Paper on Adult Education, heralds a new age of adult education. For years the Cinderella of the education sector, struggling with few resources and curtailed by the self-financing rule, the era of adult education seems finally to have arrived. There is good reason for optimism as the White Paper promises increased resources and support for most sectors within adult education. The commitment to a partnership model, to community education and to equality of access is also a welcome development. But this has not always been the case. The struggle to develop women's community-based education in Ireland has been long and hard. Its growth is largely due to the vision and voluntary effort of many women throughout the country. Community-based education has been extremely important to women's lives both in urban and rural areas. As women have been traditionally disadvantaged in relation to formal and continuing education and in relation to the labour market, community-based education has made a unique contribution to the education system and has opened up real options to countless women. During this time it has developed multiple models of good practice and a methodology of group work which have been crucial to its success. One of the striking features of the growth of women's community-based education has been the tenacity of the voluntary management committees who, supported by key individuals within a wide variety of organisations, continued to deliver educational courses in the face of many persistent barriers. As the case studies reveal, these barriers still exist. It is interesting to chart the course of these barriers over the past ten years.

DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION

One of the earliest studies of women's community-based education was undertaken by AONTAS at the beginning of the 1990s. This was a study of daytime education groups as they were called then (Inglis, Bailey, Murray, 1993). The groups were predominantly local voluntary groups of women educating themselves. The authors describe these groups as 'the major phenomenon within adult education in Ireland'. The groups had mushroomed from half a dozen in the early1980s to almost one hundred at the time of the study. It identified 96 groups with 8,723 participants, giving a ratio of approximately 90 participants to 1 group. The authors identified three key characteristics:

- daytime provision of classes
- voluntary management committees
- run by women for women with the inclusion of crèche facilities

This was the beginning of recognition that timing and support were crucial issues for women. This study also found that

- the main type of learning was oriented towards social and personal understanding with more than one-third of groups indicating that personal development was the most popular course
- most courses were run on a strict self-financing basis though more than half of respondents provided subsidies
- more than half the groups operated from private homes
- two-thirds provided a crèche
- the main problem was funding with some groups receiving small one-off grants from the Department of Social Welfare and no direct support from the Department of Education
- the relationship between the groups and the VECs was described as ambivalent. Much depended on the particular VEC and AEO in the area
- 30% of groups did not consider the local AEO was helpful
- more than 66% felt that the Department of Education had little interest in them

Demand for personal development-type courses was a key feature of women's community-based education throughout the 1990s. The study took over a year to complete due to the fragility of the groups, which were run by volunteers operating mostly from their own homes. The authors identified sustaining energy and commitment as a huge problem for many of the groups. Given the fragility of the groups and the low level of support they received, it might be expected that, like mushrooms, they would disappear overnight. However, in spite of the scale and range of problems facing them, the mushrooming of groups continued throughout the 1990s.

While it is obvious that the numbers involved in women's community-based education have increased significantly in the last decade, it is difficult to assess the number of groups and participants. This is one of the consequences of the under-funding of the sector. With low levels of funding available, what there was went into direct provision and mapping exercises were rare or unknown. However, an accepted figure is approximately 1,000 groups (Dolphin & Mulvey 1997, and McMinn 1996:25). In his address on policy on women's education at the POWER Seminar on 24th May 2000, Mr. Des O'Loughlin, Assistant Principal Officer in the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science, confirmed the acceptance of this approximate figure when he said there were:

> *now in the region of 1,000 daytime education women's groups throughout the country, with an estimated 30,000 women participating in them.*

If this figure is reasonably accurate, it represents an amazing tenfold increase from 96 to 1000 in a decade. It is all the more remarkable given that many of the problems identified in 1990 remain unresolved. But perhaps this ten-fold increase in the number of groups involved in women's community-based education is not quite as amazing as it seems at first glance. The social, economic and political disadvantages that women faced in 1990 have not significantly diminished in the intervening years. Women's community-based education is one of the main arenas where women can come together to explore and consider the problems they face.

An examination carried out by AONTAS of the difficulties facing women's community-based education groups (Mulvey, 1994:4) identified four key problems:

Funding

The majority of funding available was in the form of once-off, small grants given for the organization of particular types of courses and was insufficient to meet demand. Ongoing, secure funding for salaries and developmental or representational work was largely unavailable.

Premises

Most groups operated in premises owned by someone else and which were often unsuitable to the needs of adults. They tended to be unwanted spaces, unused schoolrooms, old parish buildings, the back of churches etc. There was no security of tenure and no control of the conditions of the premises. These circumstances made it difficult for groups to provide the type of learning environment they wished. Lack of crèche facilities presented a further problem.

Skills

The voluntary management committees received little or no formal training for the work they were undertaking. They built up high levels of skill and knowledge from the experience they gained but there was no framework which recognised and built on these skills and knowledge.

Accreditation

Lack of formal recognition for learning achieved in community and non-formal settings presented a barrier to progression routes for further education and training. Not all women wanted to progress to higher and further education but for those who did, it presented a major barrier. Other outcomes for women included paid work, political action, involvement in complementary therapies, group facilitation and arts activities. However, many groups found that learners were getting frustrated with the lack of formal recognition for their learning and with the lack of opportunity to advance their learning.

Mulvey (ibid.) notes that while national funding levels had increased these remained low and insecure. She also pointed out that accessing newly available European funding required a level of competency and skill that was experienced as intimidating by many groups not yet ready to implement a major project. Without premises of their own, groups depended on the 'goodwill or whim of landlords' (Mulvey, 1994:) and were unable to create the learning environment they wanted. Securing suitable space for crèche facilities was also a difficulty. As women's community-based education groups were seen to have an understanding of their communities, their credentials with state agencies gradually became established and increasingly they were drawn into additional activities such as local development planning and partnership arrangements. This placed additional pressures on voluntary management committees who increasingly become involved in representational as well as education provision and support work. Faced with increasingly complex work, management committee members and workers identified the need for training for themselves. Mulvey (ibid.) states:

> They [Management committees members and workers] emphasized that their work increasingly requires of them skills in a broad range of areas such as organisation and administration, management, group facilitation, tutoring, evaluation, planning, political analysis and lobbying and marketing and public relations.

The final problem identified was the lack of formal recognition for non-formal learning. Kelly (1995) addressed this issue in depth. Her findings indicated 'a substantial demand' for accreditation. While some progress has been made on this issue in recent years it has been slow and piecemeal. The vast majority of women who undertake community-based education operate without any framework, which recognises the value of their learning and links it to a formal accreditation system.

The challenge faced by women's community education groups and the agencies, which support them in developing access routes, is not to be underestimated. Given the pressure on the third level sector from school leavers, the needs of non-mainstream learners have been neglected or ignored. In their international study Skilbeck & Connell (2000:6) include the following in their analysis of barriers:

> a continuing prejudice towards, lack of understanding and willingness or ability to provide support for, the needs of particular disadvantaged groups.

As the case studies presented in the next chapter illustrate, the issue of support is vital and needs to be an overarching strategy throughout educational provision from literacy to third level if educational disadvantage is to be effectively tackled.

Before examining the development of Women's Education Networks, it is worth considering the sobering experience of the Mervue Adult Training & Education (MATE) group (Lymer:1995). In her article 'Death by Neglect', Lymer describes the birth and death of a dynamic example of women's community-based education. Mervue is a community on the east side of Galway City and MATE grew out of a women's group in 1984. Over 30 women attended the first meeting, although from the beginning MATE experienced uneven levels of support from statutory agencies:

> The 'Thursday Morning Women's Group' was a great outlet for women both socially and educationally and participation and attendance was always high. The women expressed interest in doing a personal development course. An approach was made to the Vocational Education Committee for a tutor or funding. It was unable to provide either. The group contacted the Adult Education Officer, Mr. Seamus O'Grady, at University College Galway and the Health Education Officer, Ms. Jacky Jones, at the Western Health Board for support. Both organisations jointly supported and funded the course.

MATE at least had other options in the University and Jacky Jones was one of the few women Health Education Officers at the time. Some universities, and specifically those with Women's Studies centres or adult education departments, have been very supportive, through outreach courses and working in partnership with community-based groups to meet the specific needs of different groups. However universities are geographically dispersed and are significantly under-resourced for access and outreach work. It must be pointed out that Galway City did not have an Adult Education Organiser but MATE's experience has strong echoes of the Inglis, Bailey & Murray research which indicated a lack of support from VECs. Lymer describes how MATE tried to meet with the VEC's Chief Executive Officer but a meeting was 'not forthcoming'. She also makes a crucial point regarding the provision of adult education funding when she states that whatever funding was available went to Literacy and the VEC organised night classes at local VEC schools. The under-funding of literacy work until recently has been scandalous. However, community-based education also has a vital role to play in tackling educational disadvantage and needs to be adequately resourced.

In the 1999 Adult Literacy & Community Education Scheme (ALCES) £5.665m was allocated to literacy and £1m to community education (Des O'Loughlin, Department of Education, telephone call 6th July 2000). Under the White Paper, it is now proposed that 10% of all Back to Education Initiative increases will be earmarked exclusively for community education. (White Paper, 2000:17) The history of MATE is a stark record of those long years of struggle. MATE received no direct funding from the VEC or other organisations. It fundraised through holding flag days, cake sales, ceilis and socials. Lymer describes the 'pebble in the pond' effect of MATE, which led to groups being established in Barna, Westside and Oranmore Adult Education Groups. MATE died of exhaustion in 1992. Lymer says:

> I was also burned out and felt frustrated. I felt that what seemed to be never ending fundraising, not getting proper support (what did we need to do to prove ourselves?), dealing with bureaucracy and committees made the work more difficult especially for a voluntary group…Why did we end up doing the work, to a great extent, of the VEC? Despite many requests we were given no support for our work. The work was done on a voluntary basis.

That was in 1992 but little has changed since. This year, McMinn & O'Meara (2000) found that voluntarism and lack of paid staff places a huge burden on group members. They describe the 'hidden costs' to volunteers of being involved on committees and in groups and give examples of babysitting, phone, photocopying, postage and travel costs as well as the time commitment given by volunteers. One member had attended forty one meetings in the previous year. They conclude that the sector is sustained by voluntarism, with available funding ad-hoc, short-term and therefore insecure, which precisely mirrors Mulvey's findings (Mulvey, 1994) over six years earlier.

DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION NETWORKS

Facing the range of challenges outlined above, it was perhaps inevitable that women's community-based education groups would develop their own support framework in the shape of women's education networks. Kavanagh (2000:3) describes the role of the networks as:

- strengthening local group effectiveness
- addressing gaps in provision
- pushing collectively for policy change

Rather than diminishing in the intervening years, the range of issues facing groups increased and the twin issues of representation and access to progression routes and mainstream programmes were added to Mulvey's 1994 list of funding, premises, skills and accreditation (Kavanagh ibid.). The crucial role women's groups and networks play in the provision and development of community based education is outlined in Chapter 3 which describes the Greencastle group where the role of Letterkenny Women's Centre in relation to the Second Chance Education Project is pivotal in the development of this tightly focussed work. Kavanagh (ibid.) describes the dual role of women's education networks, which includes support and development of network members along with representative and lobbying roles. The support and development work encompasses information dissemination, newsheet production, networking, training and ongoing advice. The representation and lobbying work takes place in a variety of fora and includes partnerships and consultation processes, for example: NAPS, Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs' Green Paper on Community and Voluntary Activity, Department of Education & Science's' Green and White Papers on Adult Education, and the Beijing Platform for Action +5 Review among others.

The WENDI (Women's Education Network Development Initiative) Project, initiated and piloted by AONTAS, was funded through the WEI (Women's Education Initiative). The WEI is described later in the policy section. The WENDI Project targeted sixteen Women's Education Networks, all of them members of AONTAS. It aimed: (a) to develop the networks as a regionally based infrastructure of support for locally-based voluntary women's education groups; and, (b) to facilitate the development of a partnership approach to the delivery of education services to women through actively establishing and supporting links between voluntary and statutory providers throughout Ireland (Kavanagh, 2000:7).

Kavanagh (ibid.) identified the isolation of the networks as the key factor which contributed to their lack of recognition by mainstream education players. She also identified the following key difficulties experienced by the networks:

- lack of resources
- lack of recognition
- lack of added support such as childcare, transport
- lack of skills in representation and lobbying
- lack of structured support for networks.

These difficulties mirror exactly the problems faced by the networks' member groups and are intrinsically linked. Kavanagh (ibid.) identifies the continued growth of the sector as dependent on the implementation of training in advanced skills and development, with regional and national support for women's education networks that have childcare provision as a core element. The WENDI Project has developed a regionally based infrastructure of support for the networks, which in turn support locally based voluntary women's education groups involved in addressing the educational disadvantage of women throughout Ireland.

The value of the work undertaken by the women's community-based education sector was confirmed by McMinn & O'Meara (2000), who found that policy makers and funders agreed that the work of the community women's sector, which includes community-based education, was valuable and worth sustaining for economic, social, cultural and political reasons. They quote one representative of a funding body who describes the community women's sector as being:

> about empowerment, providing opportunities and support for those experiencing poverty and exclusion to have some control over their own lives. The sector will need infrastructures, services, choices, etc. to produce local vibrant economies which people can participate in.

This describes the type of work needed to tackle the causes of poverty which were described by the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA, 1999:2) as being an unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunities within society.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION

In order to obtain an accurate picture of current levels of the participation of women in community based education, a national survey needs to be undertaken. In the absence of such a survey, an examination of the current and past figures helps create a picture, albeit incomplete. The only surveys identified at the time of this research are the Inglis, Bailey, and Murray survey published in 1993 (described earlier), the Kellehers' research on locally based community and family support groups (1999), and the WEFT Report (2000).

The Kellehers (1999) reviewed the social impact of 26 groups which received funding from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. Their analysis of the activities undertaken by groups revealed that 73% were involved in training/adult education. Seven of the groups they reviewed were women's groups and between them they have roughly 350 members. In their research for WEFT in 2000, McMinn & O'Meara surveyed 200 groups in the six southern border counties. They received information from 88 groups who had a total of 5,023 participants. Their analysis of the groups' main activities revealed that 58% were involved in community education. 47% were involved in social activities, followed by arts and crafts, health, social change, training for employment, childcare. It is important to note that most groups were involved in an average of at least three activities.

Based on these three surveys and the Department of Education and Science estimates, the following picture emerges:

Year	**Number of Groups**	**Number of Participants/users**	**Average number per group**	**Source**
1991/2 – countrywide	96	8,723	91	Inglis, Bailey, Murray 1993
1999 – countrywide groups funded by Dept of Social Community and Family Affairs	7	350	50	Kellehers 1999
2000 – countrywide	1,000	30,000	30	Department of Education 2000
2000 – 6 southern border counties	57	5,900	57	McMinn & O'Meara 2000

Taking the four averages from the above table, and averaging these in turn yields a figure of approximately fifty seven women per group as an overall average.

In assessing the scale of women's community-based education some comparisons with other activities within adult and mainstream education are illuminating. Bear in mind that in 1993 when the Inglis, Bailey & Murray survey was published it revealed that 96 groups were servicing 8,723 participants. In the same year participation in VTOS (Vocational Training

Opportunities Scheme) reached 2,380 people rising from a base of 336 in 1990. The latest published figures (Department of Education Green Paper, 1998:52) for VTOS indicate that participation rates have now risen to 5,000. Community-based women's education is likely to become a stepping stone into VTOS as it develops a range of flexible modes of delivery. It is also important to note that the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs funds over 800 women's groups involved in educational activities. These groups are estimated to run 2/3 courses per week, with an average of 15 participants per course.

Participation in the Leaving Certificate in 1998 totalled 64,155 (Department of Education and Science, phone call, 22 June 2000). 1998 was a baby boom year as the number of births peaked in 1980 and has declined since. However as the demography of the population changes, the needs of the 597,000 women engaged in home duties (HEA, 1999:35), and the 34% of adults aged 25-44 and the 46% of adults aged 35-44 years who have not completed at least upper secondary education (HEA: 1999:23), need to be considered. It should be noted that the figures from which this study are drawn do not analyse the attainment levels of adults beyond 45 years as CAO data shows that 91% of mature students who accepted places in 1996 were under 45 years.

Using these different sources of data on women's community-based education, it is clear that there are at least 1,000 groups with participation levels ranging from 30,000 to 100,000. In the light of the findings of recent research as described, a figure at the higher end of this range seems most likely.

POLICY OVERVIEW

This section examines particular policies which have impacted on community based education for women. It begins with the most current overall analysis of policy in relation to women and education undertaken by McMinn (POWER Partnership: 2000:4&5). The three most recent policy and funding initiatives which specifically targeted women are then considered, followed by consideration of the White Paper on Adult Education. The chapter concludes with a brief review of policy issues and perspectives arising from discussions with key policy makers undertaken for this resesearch.

The following table analyses policy which affects women and education (ibid.):

1

GOVERNMENT POLICY	POLICY OBJECTIVES in relation to women	IMPLEMENTATION BODIES	PROGRAMMES SUPPORTING WOMEN'S EDUCATION
Adult Education & Lifelong learning	Reskilling and upskilling the workforce Tackling educational disadvantage and social exclusion	Vocational Education Committees Department of Education and Science	VEC Outreach provision Womens Education Initiative
Social Welfare	National Anti-poverty Strategy	Department of Social Community and Family Affairs Health Boards	Scheme of Grants to Locally-Based Women's Groups
Community Development	National Anti-poverty Strategy	Department of Social Community and Family Affairs	Scheme of grants to locally-based women's groups
Employment	Tackling unemployment	Area Based Partnerships EU Support Structures NWCI	FAS funded schemes NOW programme (EU funded)

2

EUROPEAN UNION/ GOVERNMENT POLICY	POLICY OBJECTIVES in relation to women	IMPLEMENTATION BODIES	PROGRAMMES SUPPORTING WOMEN'S EDUCATION
Gender Equality (EU) [4th Action Programme for Equal Opportunities Amsterdam Treaty]	Equal opportunities for participation, equality of outcome for women and procedures to monitor these	ADM Gender Equality Guidelines	
Equality Legislation (Gov.)			
Peace & Reconciliation (EU)	Tackling the Effects of Partition and the Troubles Social Inclusion Measures	ADM CPA	Scheme of grants for cross-border projects [5% of P&R funding to women's groups]

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

For many years the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) formerly known as the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) was the only or main source of funding for women's community groups. In 1990 the Department initiated special funding programmes targeted at support of locally-based women's groups and community development projects. The Locally-Based Women's Group Scheme had an initial budget of approximately £2m, and attracted applications from over three hundred women's groups. One hundred and eighty groups were allocated grants ranging from £160 to £10,000. A Combat Poverty Agency review of the scheme at the end of its first year of operation found that over six thousand women benefited directly from the funding and that the scheme was 'a vitally important, essential and encouraging first step in enabling those women's groups to continue and to develop their work. (cit. in Dolphin and Mulvey, 1997:24). The scheme continued and was expanded in subsequent years, and in 1994 the Department introduced Core Funding Grants, to enable groups to employ a co-ordinator and to plan ahead. As a direct result of the success of the Locally-Based Women's Group Scheme, in 1993 the Combat Poverty Agency initiated a new pilot programme for the development of Women's Networks. Networks were considered to hold 'great potential for the provision of an infrastructure of support for community development work with women and for developing a real vehicle for change for women through raising awareness of the nature and causes of women's poverty and how to effectively tackle it'. (ibid.:41) The pilot programme was mainstreamed in 1995.

The DSFCA currently funds a range of schemes targeting community development, family support groups and core-funded groups. There is no longer an overarching programme explicitly naming and targeting locally-based women's groups, although local women's groups are specifically mentioned among the disadvantaged groups eligible for funding under the 3-year funding scheme in particular. AONTAS has recently obtained a grant of £150,000, payable over three years, to develop the capacity of Women's Networks in combating women's disadvantage and developing a partnership approach to linking Women's Networks and key agencies at national level with a view to influencing policy.

New Opportunities for Women (NOW)

The central aim of NOW was the support of actions that redress the inequalities of women in poverty, unemployment, or marginalised circumstances and support them towards social and economic independence (NOW, 1999). This report identifies the primary barriers to access to the labour market as the inaccessibility and inflexibility of existing mainstream training and education provision coupled with the limitations of the accreditation system. Among the lessons learned were the need for:

- information and guidance
- pre-development work
- supports including childcare/social care
- study skills and mentoring

- transport
- access to premises
- flexible means of delivery
- accreditation and assessment structures

NOW funding facilitated a developmental process with many models of good practice. Failure to allocate mainstream resources to pursue the progress made under NOW will have a detrimental effect on the continuity of women's education and training.

Women's Education Initiative (WEI)

A welcome development in 1998 was the establishment by the Department of Education and Science of the Women's Education Initiative as the first funding measure to specifically support women's education. The WEI was funded by the Department of Education & Science during 1998/1999 and aided by the European Social Fund. It was established to assist projects to address current gaps in provision for educationally disadvantaged women. Over the two years of its life it supported thirteen projects to develop models of good practice. The aim was to develop models which would be capable of wider application and which would impact on future policy thereby bringing about long-term change in the further education opportunities of educationally disadvantaged women.

Some of the key learning from the WEI experience (WEI, 2000:13) was that in order to engage and retain the most marginalised and disadvantaged women the following supports were needed:

- one-to-one support for participants
- study skills modules and support, both individually and in groups
- mentoring and guidance
- childcare

A range of strategies were highlighted within the WEI as effective in improving current provision's responsiveness to the needs of educationally disadvantaged women:

- needs assessment especially for particular groups of women, e.g.: travellers, refugees, women coping with violent partners, prisoners' partners, and others
- development of training programmes recognising the specific experiences of women, e.g. sensitivity to the experience of violence in the home etc.
- networking with other educational providers and agencies to build outreach contacts
- accreditation systems that validate women's learning and the development of a credit system for women's learning
- targeting and recruitment of hard-to-reach groups

The approaches taken by the WEI included a commitment to programmes that were inclusive, consultative and empowering. The WEI has now been mainstreamed by the Department of Education and Science within the framework of the National Development Plan (NDP). It has been replaced by an Education Equality Initiative (EEI), which has been allocated £3.5m over six years, i.e. approx. £600K per year. The EEI, targets both disadvantaged women and men and the NDP states that many of the projects will retain a single sex focus. The WEI has provided a substantial range of models of good practice and it is important that these models be mainstreamed also. The Department's continued commitment to educationally disadvantaged women is welcome and it is to be hoped that the transition from the WEI to the EEI will strengthen women's education work on the ground.

White Paper on Adult Education 2000

The White Paper is a most welcome development and signals a clear government commitment to establishing a comprehensive system of lifelong learning. It promises increased resources and support for adult education. Its commitment to a partnership model, to community education and to equality of access is encouraging. It merits close reading as it aims to provide a framework for the development of the Adult Education sector. It also identifies priority areas for investment as well as priority groups and programme areas. It covers:

- Second Chance and Further Education
- Community Education
- Workplace Education
- Higher Education
- Support Services
- Co-operation with Northern Ireland
- Structures

along with definitions of adult education, a description of the consultation process and a review of recent policy developments. It illustrates a clear commitment by Government and the development of a national policy in line with the European Commission, OECD and UNESCO. It catalogues the development of this commitment from the aspirational position evident in the 1980s, following publication of the Kenny Report when Government and the education system was 'straining to cope' with a growing young population. The White Paper on Education (1995) continued to reflect this youth centered focus but a shift began in the late 1990s with the designation by the EU Commission of the Year of Lifelong Learning and the OECD (1996) report. The need to develop a comprehensive system of adult education was beginning to be recognised and the White Paper on Human Resource Development (1997) and the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey (1997) revealed the comparatively low levels of education of Irish adults. The role of education, including adult education in combating disadvantage was being realised through a range of programmes such as VTOS, NOW, INTEGRA and HORIZON. Against this background, the value of education as an important measure to tackle disadvantage received greater recognition. Lifelong Learning was a central theme in both the NESC Report (1999) and the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF) (2000). Key resourcing commitments were made in the National Development Plan (2000-2006), especially in respect of the following:

- National Adult Literacy Strategy £73.8m
- Further Education Support Measure £35m which provides for the establishment of an Adult Education Guidance Service for the first time
- Back to Education Initiative (PLC, Youthreach/Traveller, VTOS) £1.027bn with an expansion of part-time options
- Third-level Access Measure £95m
- National Qualifications Framework £35m
- Equality initiatives £19.6m

These financial commitments will bring to life the framework which the White Paper aims to provide. From the perspective of community-based women's education a key question is whether the 3Rs of adult education: recognition, resources and representation are addressed.

Recognition

Undoubtedly the White Paper recognises the contribution of community education:

- in reaching large numbers of participants, frequently in disadvantaged settings;
- in pioneering new approaches to teaching and learning in non-hierarchical, community-based settings;
- in taking the lived experience of the participants as a starting point.

Significantly the role of community groups as providers of education is recognised. This is an important and logical development. Some of the larger well-established community groups, such as KLEAR, can provide education to 600 adults approximately. In some cases they may even cater for more adults than school-run adult education programmes.

Resources

Specific resources for community education include:

- Thirty-five Community Education Facilitators who will be required to demonstrate a deep-rooted knowledge of the communities they serve and a clear understanding and empathy with the philosophy and processes of community education.
- A specific Community Education Technical Support Unit, under the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) to co-ordinate, assist and monitor the work of the Community Education Facilitators. The Unit will work closely with a number of

agencies to provide technical support to community-based women's groups, men's groups, travellers and other ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, community arts groups and older people. The Unit will be pivotal in linking NALC with the community education sector.

- The Education Equality Initiative (£3,5m) which was developed from the Women's Education Initiative and includes men's groups. The aim of EEI is to address gaps in provision, to undertake outreach and pre-development work, to facilitate progression, to promote learning partnerships, to mainstream learning, to share good practice and to inform policy. £3.5m has been provided over the life of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2000-2006.
- A separate budget line for community education in the non-statutory sector to be funded in the longer term, when it grows to a sufficient size, through the Local Adult Learning Boards (LALBs). This aims to provide a more streamlined and longer term funding mechanism and will be 10% of the annual increase provided under the Back to Education Initiative representing a commitment of at least £20m extra investment in the sector for the six years of the NDP. This is in addition to the £1m annually given to VECs under the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES). Criteria for the scheme, implementation and reporting arrangements and performance indicators will be drawn up nationally.

Before concluding this examination of resources committed under the White Paper, it is worth reconsidering McMinn & O'Meara's conclusion that the community women's sector, which includes women's community-based education, is sustained by voluntarism, with available funding ad-hoc, short-term and therefore insecure, and reflecting on the following imperfect but sobering table:

Measure	**Cost/Year**	**Participation/Year**
VTOS	£26.439m/1998	5,000/1998
Literacy	£5.665m/1999	5,000/1998
Community Education	£1m/1999	14,000/1998
WEI	£.3m/1998	13 projects
EEI	£.583/2000	18 projects
NOW	£30m	104 projects
Women's Community-Based Education	Unknown	30,000 – 100,000 estimate

The White Paper establishes a separate budget line which will help address the ad-hoc nature of the funding. The intention that funding be committed in 3-year time programmes will help address the short-term nature of previous funding initiatives. The commitment of £20m over the life of the NDP will result in additional £3.3m (approximate) plus the current £1m being allocated per annum to community education. This gives an approximate total of

£4.3m per annum for community education. To get a clear picture of how this will impact at local level, two further calcualtions are necessary; one in relation to the level of funding for each LALB; the other in relation to the 1,000 or so community based women's education groups. Thirty-three LALBS will be established, who will in time have responsibility for allocating funding. This will give each Board on average £130,000 approximately per annum to resource community education within their area. On the other hand, if this figure of 4.3 million was evenly divided over the 1,000 community based women groups currently involved (excluding men's groups, travellers and other ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, community arts groups and older people), it would average £4,300 per group. Obviously, groups of different sizes and addressing the needs of various client groups have different resource needs. However, the analysis by McMinn and O'Meara that women's groups experience 'limited access to funding, a lack of core funding and financial insecurity' will barely begin to be addressed by the resources allocated under the proposals outlines in the White Paper.

Representation

To see how the issue of representation for community-based women's education groups is addressed, new structures must be examined. The White Paper's proposals for the structural development of adult education are as follows:

National Adult Learning Council (NALC)

This is a new structure and the work of NALC will concentrate on the critical areas of co-ordination, liaison, policy advice, monitoring, quality, staff development and research. It is not envisaged that it will have a funding or administrative role. The Board of NALC will be composed of 24 members:

One representative from:
- AONTAS
- National Adult Literacy Agency
- FAS
- Teagasc
- CERT
- Irish Vocational Education Association
- Joint Management Body and Association of Community Comprehensive Schools
- Teachers Union of Ireland
- Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland
- Union of Students of Ireland
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Higher Education Authority
- Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology
- Council of Heads of Irish Universities
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Two representatives from:

- Community and Voluntary Pillar
- Employers

Two nominees of the:

- Minister of Education and Science
- Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Its staff structure will have four technical units:

- Adult Education and the Formal Education Sector
- Workplace Learning
- Community Education
- Research

Local Adult Education Board (LALBs)

These are new structures and their work will concentrate on needs assessment, planning and co-ordination, allocation and targeting of resources, promoting equality of participation, benefit and outcome from under represented groups, developing partnerships and reporting to NALC. Up to 20 members of the Boards will be chosen and will include:

One representative from:

- FAS
- Teagasc
- CERT
- Teachers Union of Ireland
- Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland
- Learners
- ICTU
- Area Partnership
- County/City Development Board
- Library Service
- Adult Literacy Service
- Health Board
- Institute of Technology where appropriate
- University sector where appropriate

Two representatives from:
- VEC
- Employers

Four representatives nominated by the :
- Community and Voluntary Pillar, including Travellers and disability interests.

The LALB will be established as an autonomous sub-committee of the VEC and will be administratively hosted by them. The VEC will also be the employer of additional staff. There is a requirement on the LALB to ensure parity of esteem between the different interest groups and that each Board member has full and equal status.

Community Fora

The LALB will be required to formally convene local community fora. Public meetings of all interest groups with a role in adult education should be invited: schools, community and adult education groups, youth, adult literacy, welfare, health, employment centres and training agencies.

White Paper: Overview

The White Paper, while recognising community groups as providers of education, does not include any explicit mechanism for their representation on the new decision making bodies, i.e. NALC or the LALBs. It is possible that community groups may sit on these bodies through the community and voluntary pillar or other interest groups but they do not have a place in their own right in terms of representation. The only reference to them is in relation to the Community Fora, where they will be invited along with other interest groups, many of which have explicit representation at both national and local level.

The White Paper heralds a new age for adult education and contains many welcome developments. However, its precursor was criticised for ignoring gender and it is disappointing that no explicit provision is made to ensure that women will have equal representation in their own right in the proposed new structures.

Community education is a particular example of where women developed education provision and methodologies appropriate for their communities. The success of such provision and methodologies has a direct role in combating poverty and disadvantage. As the case studies in Chapter 3 testify, community-based women's education has proved itself on the ground. It has developed strategies to address the challenges of economic, social and political disadvantage. If equality of access and parity of esteem are to become embedded into the system of adult education, explicit mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that community education groups generally and women's community education groups specifically are fully represented on decision making and policy formulation bodies.

Policy Issues and Perspectives: Key Agencies

While the White Paper represents the most developed statement of central government policy on adult education to date, there is a range of different agencies involved, both directly and indirectly, with adult education provision at community level. For the purposes of this study, discussions took place with key individuals in relevant government departments, statutory and other agencies to explore their views on the role and development of women's education at community level. (See Appendix 2) Discussions focused on the question of the current and future development of women's community-based education, issues of targeted funding for women's community-based education and of the representation of this sector within the relevant decision-making processes.

There was an across the board acknowledgement of the importance of women's community-based education but more uneven and varied understandings of issues and difficulties affecting the development of the sector. Agencies, such as Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) and Area Development Management Ltd (ADM) revealed a close understanding of both the significance of women's community-based education and the obstacles to development and participation as they operate at local level. In this context, the need for a national support or resource structure for women's community groups was emphasised by CPA, a point echoed by both ADM and AONTAS. Such a structure was seen as essential to strengthening women's capacity to participate as well as to the development of a dedicated lobby for the sector and would have a role in relation to regional women's networks as well as individual community groups.

Specific barriers to the participation of women on community education programmes and activities were also identified by CPA, ADM and AONTAS: e.g. lack of provision of flexible (or any) forms of funded child or dependent care; rigid structuring and delivery of courses; and lack of recognition for and accreditation of women's educational activities at community level

Both the Departments of Social, Community and Family Affairs and Education and Science emphasised that increased funding has been made available to locally-based women's groups and to community education over recent years and acknowledge that these groups and activities play an important role in combating disadvantage. Neither Department considered that specifically targeted funding for women's groups or women's community education was necessary, both taking the view that women were already the majority of beneficiaries under such funding. There was little support at government departmental level for the view that women within community development and community education have specific or unique needs. A similar perspective was articulated by FAS whose community-based training was described as 'client-driven' with no specific gender targeted programme activity or budget line.

The issue of the representation of women's community based education groups within the relevant decision-making structures at local, regional and national level was another important issue which was strongly raised by CPA, ADM and AONTAS. Little support for the direct representation of women's community-based education groups and networks on decision-making structures was expressed by government departments. The allocation of places to the voluntary and community sector on Local Adult Learning Boards and other structures (together with the existence of the 40:60 gender balance guidelines) were presented as the means for establishing representation of women's community groups. In contrast, those agencies with a stronger attachment to local and community development in disadvantaged areas, such as ADM, CPA and AONTAS argued strongly for direct representation of women's networks and the need to take specific measures to ensure and support the greater representation of women in decision-making systems. It was also pointed out that the 40:60 gender balance guideline is not being delivered in practice. The importance of a co-ordinated, integrated and holistic approach to women's community-based education was a point made particularly strongly by AONTAS, who expressed concern at the lack of a specific brief for women's community-based education in any government department and stressed the need for an inter-departmental approach linked to targeted programmes and specific budget lines.

Both government departments and statutory agencies have demonstrated a growing recognition of the importance of women's community-based education over recent years. This has been reflected in a greater allocation of funding, some acknowledgement of the significance and impact of this sector and a greater awareness of the supports and resources necessary to its development. These developments are to be welcomed but it must also be recognised that they have only provided a start, albeit an important start, to the process of developing a comprehensive system of resource allocation and recognition to support the activities of this sector at local and regional level. It is also true that these developments frequently depend on the commitment of key individuals in agencies and departments and as such are both uneven and fragile. More formal commitment to this sector through the establishment of dedicated budgetary resources and definite lines of responsibility are crucial. In addition, the whole issue of representation has received little attention and there is a continuing lack of formal mechanisms in place to ensure that women's interests and women's community-based education as a sector are properly and adequately represented in decision-making structures and systems at local, regional and national level.

CHAPTER THREE

Five Case Studies

It has made me more assertive and made me feel important, able to speak up, air opinions, able to say yes or not if the occasion arises. It makes me feel I am able to go further and maybe able to make better use of my life.

INTRODUCTION

To explore the role of women's community-based education in combating poverty and disadvantage, five case studies involving a total of seven separate groups and one network were undertaken in five regions of the Republic of Ireland. In this chapter we first outline the rationale for the selection of these case studies, and comment briefly on the relationship between poverty, geographical location and other structural factors. The case study methodology is then described. This is followed by a discussion of the common themes and issues which arose in all of the focus groups, with the findings from each of the focus groups forming the main body of the chapter. A synthesis of the main issues emerging from interviews with local support agencies is then presented. The final section focuses on the way forward as identified by focus group participants. A short conclusion reflects on the findings from the field research.

Rationale for the Selection of the Five Case Studies

The five case study regions were: Donegal, West Dublin, South West Kerry, Longford Town, and Waterford City. The wide geographic spread enabled the researchers to gather information from groups in diverse urban and rural locations, and in a range of different socio-economic settings.

To present the broadest possible picture of women's experiences in community-based education within the limited research timescale, groups were selected with different histories, aims, structures and composition. Members of the groups are of diverse ages, and from a wide range of social classes and educational backgrounds. The focus groups and paper questionnaire reveal that the participants ranged from young women in their early twenties who had only been involved in community education for a few months, through to women in retirement who had many years of life-long learning and organising at community level.

No two groups started life in the same way; all grew out of a response to local needs, and each group has developed courses with distinctive objectives and content. In order to survive, they have created their own particular alliances with a variety of agencies and organisations. Some of the groups operate autonomously, while others are closely linked into associations or networks. Since the development of networking is widely considered to be a crucial factor in strengthening the women's community-based education sector, regional groupings and networks as well as locally-based women's groups were targeted for inclusion in the research.

Poverty, Geographical Location and Structural Factors

When considering geographical location in relation to poverty and disadvantage, the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA, 1999:30) points out that poverty and deprivation affect virtually every part of the country and every type of area within the country. Thus, the setting up of Partnership Companies in Designated Areas of Disadvantage was a government response to the spatial distribution of poverty. Nationally 54% of the population live in Partnership Areas (NESF: 30). All the groups targeted for this research are located in Partnership Areas. In the Border Midlands West Region (BMWR), 86% of the population live in designated areas including Donegal and Longford, whereas in the South East Region (SER), 44% of the population live in designated areas including Waterford and the Dublin suburbs of Clondalkin and Tallaght.

It has been noted that housing tenure is a more significant factor than location in determining risk of poverty, with local authority tenancy being associated with particularly high poverty risk. In their study of the spatial distribution of poverty, Nolan, Whelan & Williams (1998:86) identify the East and South East as the regions with the highest rates of local authority tenancy, although with substantial pockets elsewhere in e.g. Donegal, Kerry, Longford and Mayo

Nonetheless, despite the importance of location and housing tenure as poverty indicators, Combat Poverty Agency has identified structural factors such as educational background, social class and position in the labour force, as well as the salient factor of women's gender, as highly significant in determining poverty risk. (CPA, 1999:30)

Since it was not possible in the present research to conduct a detailed study of women's community-based education on a nation-wide basis, it was decided to select areas or regions showing a diverse range of poverty risk factors.

Sample Areas

As well as focusing on urban agglomerations in the East and South East (West Dublin and Waterford City), Donegal was selected as a rural case study region, partly because it has the highest proportion of people whose highest educational qualification is primary level, with 40% of its population at this level compared to a national average of 25%. When third level qualifications at degree level or over are examined there is a differential of 65%, with Donegal at 5.2% compared to a national average of 8.6%.

Similarly, Longford is heavily dependent on agriculture with almost 30% of its workforce employed in this area. It has a high level of small farm holdings with 65% of its farms under 20 acres. An analysis carried out for the County Enterprise Board shows that Longford lags behind the national average in higher and lower professional categories. The county ranks 20th in relation to its percentage of Unskilled Manual Classes at 10.3% with a greater proportion of its labour force involved in semi-skilled and skilled work. The female unemployment figures show a worrying trend with the 1997 figures actually higher than those for 1994. This is particularly the case for the over 25 age group and the County Enterprise Board sees this as reflecting the need to encourage and support women back into the workforce.

The other rural area selected for study was South West Kerry. An analysis of education issues for rural women in South Kerry carried out by Mary Lyne in 1999 noted that a relatively high proportion of women have no formal educational qualifications, with 31% having left the formal education system after primary school. 60% of women in the area are likely to be either working in the home, contributing to the farm or working as seasonal part-timers with no social security entitlements. Lyne observes that since the majority of this group do not appear on the Live Register, they are not considered by policy makers in education and training organisations to be available for job-related education or training courses. In comparison with the national average, there is also a significantly higher proportion of households in South Kerry in which elderly women live alone.

In Waterford City, the location of the Access 2000 project, the population is growing at noticeably faster rate than the national average, a situation which has far-reaching implications for the social and economic development of the city, and specifically for the provision of health, housing, transport and educational services. Levels of educational attainment show that Waterford City has a poor educational standard compared to the national average, and particularly with regard to third-level qualifications. Social deprivation is endemic, with 20% of the city's population living below the poverty line.

In West Dublin a profile of the workforce (FAS 1999) shows that Clondalkin has only 15% of professional workers against a national average of 25%, so it can be assumed that third level attainment levels are lower than the national average. At the same time, the profile shows semi-skilled/unskilled workers at over 25% in Clondalkin, rather higher than the national average.

Case Study Methodology

To gain as comprehensive and specific a sense as possible of the role of women's community-based education in tackling poverty and disadvantage, five case studies of relevant groups and networks were undertaken. The case studies comprised a total of seven different groups and one network, with 91 women taking in part in focus group meetings.

The groups were selected according to a broad range of criteria, as indicated above. These included:

- geographical location
- demography (urban/rural)
- socio-economic setting
- social class
- age range
- group history, aims and management style
- educational objectives and content

In terms of the experience of being an adult learner, those surveyed ranged from young women in their early twenties who were involved for just some months through to women in retirement who had many years of lifelong learning.

Case study data was gathered by means of:

- focus group discussions
- completion by each individual focus group participant of a paper questionnaire.
- interviews with representatives of the local VECs and Partnership Companies

The focus group discussions addressed four main areas:

- barriers to participation
- supports for participation
- impact of the group on the local community
- areas for change

Five main themes subsequently emerged, because women spoke of both personal barriers and those experienced by the group as a whole. (Appendix 2)

The researchers were guided by each group's organiser as to the appropriate scheduling of the focus group, so as to enable a reasonable number of members to come together for a three-hour discussion.

The paper questionnaire was designed to gather data on a variety of topics including, for example, reasons why women joined their group, their school leaving ages and whether they worked full-time in the home or in paid employment.

The majority of participants were urban-based, 40% were rural-based, while 9% gave no response. 36% were in paid employment. The economic situation of participants is summarised below:

- 36% of participants worked fulltime in the home
- 28% were in receipt of Social Welfare
- 10% were in fulltime paid work
- 20% were in part-time paid work
- 6% were self-employed

THE CASE STUDIES

> *Yes, it has given me a lot more confidence in myself. I always regretted leaving school before doing the Leaving Cert, and now plan to do a foundation course. Before joining I had no confidence at all, and now I'm going [abroad] on my own. I always dreamed of doing this.*

In presenting the findings of the case studies, the report begins with an outline of the history and background of the group or groups visited, followed by the focus group responses to the main headings of the research, i.e. barriers to and supports for participation in community-based education; and the particular local impact of the group on the individual women interviewed and of the group on the local community. The findings of the fourth discussion focussing on what needs to change, are presented in the final section of this chapter.

Throughout, the voices of the women who participated in the focus groups have been interwoven with the discussion so as to ensure that the vivid reality of women's experiences of and reflections on community-based education are reflected as directly as possible in the research. These reflections provide a rich harvest of evidence of the many ways that local women's groups provide choices for their communities. They enable us to understand women's diverse but invariably empowering experiences of being involved in organising, promoting and participating in community-based education that is explicitly run 'by and for women'.

While it is clear that the case studies offer a "snapshot" of how these particular women expressed their views on the topics discussed on a particular day, they do not necessarily reflect the views of either the management group or of other group members. Many common themes and issues emerged in all of the focus group meetings. In fact, the most striking aspect of the case study research was the consistency and regularity with which women in very diverse locations stressed the same kinds of issues and problems in developing and accessing community-based education. These very widely held common views are outlined first, before the presentation of the individual case studies.

Common Themes and Issues

> *Widened my horizons, made me less marginalised, improved my self-confidence. Encouraged me to look further afield to other areas of interest.*

Not surprisingly, the research found that the barriers and supports mentioned by women were broadly the same in each of the groups visited, with occasional local particularities. These common themes are outlined below and are not generally repeated in the individual case studies.

When discussing barriers the participants named both collectively-experienced structural barriers as well as more personal barriers experienced at the level of individual self-perception.

The primary structural barriers mentioned by all of the groups visited were:

- absence of childcare
- lack of funding
- lack of physical space / inappropriate premises
- lack of information and guidance
- poor transport facilities
- Live Register difficulties

The most significant barriers experienced at a personal level were:

- low self-esteem
- negative school experience
- opposition from partners and family members

Women also highlighted low levels of literacy, lack of recognition for prior learning, and the hidden costs of participation including access to equipment and materials.

The support factors for participants were often the opposite of the barriers experienced. However, issues that are more difficult to quantify were also consistently highlighted. These include very significantly the positive ethos and welcoming atmosphere of a group, perceived by women as crucial in enabling their re-entry into education.

The primary factors supporting participation mentioned by all of the groups are:

- positive group ethos and welcoming atmosphere
- provision of childcare
- personal qualities and skills of tutors / personnel
- payment of allowances
- provision of funding by local / national support agencies
- location, timing and flexibility of courses

Other support factors highlighted were the importance of having a personal contact as an introduction to the group, and the impact of the premises or physical surroundings on both individual and collective learning experiences. Women regularly noted the difference it made when buildings were suitable, warm, well equipped and welcoming.

> *Absolutely yes, yes, yes, group work is so rewarding, enriching, the sharing of experience, the lightening of one's own problem, the sheer fun, all this as well as new ideas and qualifications.*

CASE STUDY 1: DONEGAL

Background to the groups visited

> *The first group I was involved in was a group doing personal development. That started the process of me finding myself, after having left a domestic violence relationship. I kept doing courses and now have my degree. The community of women activists is an important part of my life.*

In Donegal, discussions were held with two groups of women. The first group was engaged in a course called 'Bright Futures' run by the Second Chance Project in Greencastle in the north of the county. The second group was made up of women from around the county who came together specially for the focus group meeting hosted by the Second Chance Women's Education Project, at the VEC building in Letterkenny.

The history of community-based education for women in Donegal goes back some years. In the late 1980s a number of women came together in Letterkenny and formed an education group that began life in a rented room. They developed links with the Health Board and with this support set up the Women's Centre in Letterkenny. From this beginning a number of supports for women's education evolved and grew, including, for example, the Second Chance Education Project for Women, and the Donegal Women's Network which is now based in Ballybofey.

The Second Chance Project for Women (SCEPW) offers community-based education to women living in situations of economic and social disadvantage. Based in Letterkenny, it was set up in 1995. SCEPW aim to improve provision of accessible, women-centred education with affordable childcare. It encourages participants to become actively involved in community education as learners and then as facilitators. The project was developed when some women in the area identified a number of key issues which had a negative impact (and still do to an important extent) on women's participation in education in the county. In particular there was concern that young women with children and living on low incomes would not be attracted towards or able to avail of courses unless transport, childcare and other supports were provided.

To try to respond to women's needs and to overcome the barriers to their participation, SCEPW accessed funding through the International Fund for Ireland's 'Communities in Action' programme and a range of other funding supports. It is important to note that because Donegal is a border county, SCEPW has been able to access more flexible funding strands under the 'Peace and Reconciliation' programme. These funds are specifically targeted at re-building communities after the years of strife in the North. This funding has allowed for paid staff to be appointed, who can develop community-based education initiatives that will target women living in disadvantage.

Group 1: 'Bright Futures', Greencastle

Before this I was not really interested in going further with my education, but now I really want to go back and do my Leaving Cert, then on to College maybe.

The 'Bright Futures' programme is a new SCEPW initiative located in Greencastle. This is a community education response to local women's needs. The group is made up of ten young women who are attending a computer training course in the north of the county.

'Bright Futures' targets young women who are lone parents (with children aged approximately under five), living on low incomes in marginalised communities. The programme is being run at two centres, one in Greencastle and a second in Lifford. While the main focus of the training is computer skills, personal development and 'family learning' modules are included and the group has the support of an evaluation process that has been in place from the beginning. None of these young women have a Leaving Certificate. Four left school before the Junior Certificate and six left after the Junior Certificate. All of them joined the course to get a qualification. The course began in February 2000 and will end in November. The participants attend three mornings a week. There have been no 'drop outs' in either location.

The Focus Group Meeting

As already outlined, the groups visited were asked to discuss their experience of community based education for women under four headings; barriers experienced; supports needed and experienced; the impact of the group on the local area; and suggestions for what they would like to see changed. Given that the course had only recently been established, it would not have been appropriate to discuss the impact of the group on the area, so the main focus was at the level of the personal.

Seven of the participants attended the focus group meeting, and it was decided that they would complete the paper questionnaire the following week during their personal development class.

Barriers

In a large county like Donegal with a wide spread of small communities, traversed by miles of roads with no public transport, it was no surprise that the barriers presented by distance and lack of transport were top of the list. All but one of those who attended the focus group had travelled to the meeting by taxi. Other specific barriers to fuller participation on their course included lack of access to computers outside the classroom, and the absence of a public library in the area.

The participants also talked about their lack of self confidence, and the courage they had needed to join a course. They mentioned how the negative attitudes of friends could be a barrier.

Supports

> *I am someone now that I am doing something with my life. I won't be a layabout all my life*

The supports that had specifically enabled these women to participate included: funding for childcare, transport expenses, and no tuition costs. They mentioned the scheduling of the classes to fit in with their children's needs, unlike the FÁS all day training courses. The pleasant building and the warm attitude of the staff were other factors encouraging them to make a commitment to attendance. Other encouragement came from the group itself, the friends they had made, the fact that the course tutors had a background similar to their own. All of these factors had assisted them in their re-entry into education and training.

Impact

> *I want my children to respect me and my work.'*

Having a focus and motivation, a reason to get up in the morning, were the first effects spoken of. The opportunity to have space for themselves, and 'time out' from their children was another important impact of participation. That they were in the process of losing the label of 'spongers' was also very important to these young women.

> *'I will be able to hand back the book'*

When asked where they would like to be in a year's time, participants aspirations ranged from wanting to be in full-time education; to being in office work; to having a qualification; to having some choices; and to be off benefits. All of these young women wanted to 'be able to hand back the book', as one participant put it. This relates to the lone parents payments book and it spoke volumes as to how interaction with and experience of the welfare system erodes self-esteem.

Group 2: Letterkenny

> *It has made me hungry to learn more and continue on and obtain a degree.*

The Focus Group Meeting

For this focus group meeting eleven women with a number of years of experience in the sector came together to discuss their experience of community-based education in County Donegal. They came from a range of groups, some newly formed and others longer established, located in different parts of the county. They represented a broad sweep of organisers, providers and participants.

Barriers

> *It has given me the confidence that I needed to get involved in local communities. After being at home with children for ten years I found it the ideal introduction back to education, the most problems I would encounter would be transport and childcare. But the determination of all the ladies made it worth going to.*

This group forcefully expressed their criticism of FÁS, the state training agency. The lack of childcare provision by FÁS and its attitude to trainees were seen as important barriers to participating in FÁS courses. Women mentioned how on a particular course they had attended, FÁS trainers had tea breaks but not the trainees. The women felt they were being treated like sixteen year olds rather than responsible adults.

Transport and distances were again high on the list of barriers. Even where there is some public transport available, it is unlikely to meet the needs of women who want to commute to their nearest centre.

For the groups attempting to provide courses, the lack of suitable physical spaces and the lack of funding were major difficulties.

Supports

Trusting and communicating with other women, caring and sharing problems and learning how to handle and deal with life in general, be it home, finance or sharing women's problems, such as violence and women's rights.

All participants emphasised that funding and training allowances that address the barriers already named, such as childcare, transport and the cost of courses, make it possible to participate in education and training programmes.

The sense of the groups offering a 'safe space' and non-judgmental support from other women were highlighted as important supports.

Outreach work conducted in some places under the aegis of Neighbourhood Work, activates education groups in making connections directly with women in their own homes.

Specific supports from outside agencies included: the 'community house' provided by a local authority, and VEC support towards childcare training. Funding from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs for 'taster courses' allows learners try out different, accessible education modules. The local Partnership Companies have funded a number of the groups with small grants towards equipment and training costs.

Impact

> *As secretary [of the local Development Company] I was able to bring back the skills of filling in application forms for funding, lobbying politicians etc. I started up a women's group and organised many courses for them.*

The first significant impact spoken of was the setting up of the Women's Centre in Letterkenny eleven years ago. A number of energetic and visionary women worked towards the development of this centre and from there initiated innovative approaches to community based education for women throughout the county. The centre has led to the formation of the Donegal Women's Network which in turn supports a number of education groups in the county.

One of the key developments mentioned by participants is the Neighbourhood Work scheme.

> *Through this [scheme], I met a Neighbourhood Worker. This was a turning point in my life. She listened to my opinions and ideas. I have been encouraged every step of the way, [which] has led me to facilitation and tutoring.*

'Neighbourhood Work' is a particularly notable development of and in women's community-based education in Donegal. It emerged as a response to the low participation of women in marginalised communities in local education programmes. A worker from the Women's Centre called on women in their homes, to introduce herself and to tell them about available courses in women friendly groups. This process of face to face contact, breaks down barriers of fear and indifference and facilitates building of trust within communities. Neighbourhood Work has now become a firmly established practice in the county.

In Donegal Town the Women's Education Centre provides a focus for women coming to the town and helps them integrate into the local community. This group has representatives on several local committees and boards.

In Ramelton, OWL (Opportunities for Women Learning) is providing outreach and is engaged in cross-border work, while in Gortahork a new group is being set up. This has come about as result of local women's participation in the UCD/WERRC Certificate in Women's Studies established in different parts of the county in the past year. The development of an outreach third-level course targeting women, and particularly educationally disadvantaged women, has created opportunities for women to access third-level education in a county where third-level provision is very limited.

CASE STUDY 2: SOUTH WEST KERRY

South West Kerry Women's Association

> *Being involved in a group like this has made me feel like a person again – an important part of society. This group has brought out so many qualities that had been dormant in me. I just want to keep on learning.*

The South West Kerry Women's Association (SWKA) was founded in 1993. It is a large association or network, comprising seventeen women's groups. The majority of groups are involved in arts and crafts, with others engaged in personal development, cooking skills, woodwork, computer skills and others. Many of the educational and creative activities can be described as 'first step' courses towards further education and training opportunities. In the early 1990s when the SWKA was formed, there was no daytime education provision for adults in the area. This situation has changed over the years with support from the VEC and funding from the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs.

The SWKA has received funding from the Departments of Social, Community and Family Affairs, and Education and Science, the VEC and the Partnership Company. In 1998, it accessed funding from the Department of Education and Science, under the Women's Education Initiative (WEI). This funding enabled the employment of an Education Co-ordinator. She is based in the O'Connell Centre in Cahirciveen, the home of Iveragh Information Technology Training Ltd, which is being developed as a Centre for Adult and Continuing Education in South West Kerry. The local VTOS and Adult Literacy programmes are also based here.

The Director and the other tenants of the O'Connell Centre are committed to the development of adult education services in the local area. At the time of the research visit they were preparing to lobby government for funds to expand the Centre into a 'Multiplex' of education opportunities. This would allow for nine additional classrooms and a self-contained childcare unit. They argue that their proposals match the Green Paper's strategic vision of how community adult and lifelong learning would develop in the near future. The proposals also fit into local plans for the development of employment opportunities. Given that the area needs to show that it can provide a 'labour pool' with appropriate training and education in place it can be expected to be successful.

Although women's education per se is not at the centre of this new development, the SWKA has been strengthened by participation in the Women's Education Initiative (WEI) and is clearly, influencing the development of local statutory provision and the group believe it will benefit from the generally supportive environment.

The aims and objectives of SWKA are to:

- address issues arising from rural isolation
- disseminate information
- strengthen the work of women's groups
- facilitate 'second chance' opportunities for women.

In the broader context, the groups aims to develop living, learning and working structures which are appropriate to women's needs and to represent local groups at local, regional and national level.

Focus Group Meeting

> *It has encouraged me to read, feel part of something, help me express myself better. I feel that it has shown me in a new light in my children's eyes.*

Twenty three women came together for the focus group in the O'Connell Centre. The focus group was very diverse, with participants from many of the 17 groups which constitute the SWKA. There was a very broad range of educational experience, and participants ranged in age from their twenties through to retirement years.

Barriers

Given the rural location, as in Donegal, transport and the great distances that women have to travel were, not surprisingly, the first barriers to be discussed. Participants stressed that the public transport network does not meets the needs of women in the county, so for those who do not live within walking distance of a local group or who do not drive, it is not possible to avail of what is on offer. Childcare, which is sparse in urban areas, poses inevitably more of a difficulty in rural Kerry.

Women spoke of the barriers of low self-esteem, lack of information and educational guidance and the 'hidden' costs of materials, childcare and transport.

Women talked about the gap between 'first step' learning in the women's education groups and the further skills required to move on to second or third level studies. Here again, as in Donegal, poor library facilities and lack of resources such as computers, were seen as concrete barriers.

Live Register problems were a significant issue. Participants spoke of the difficulties in getting clear information as to the implications of taking up various options, such as a 'Back to Work' scheme, which could mean losing out in other ways.

Supports

> *The course I did was just a stepping stone for me, to come back to education, to follow my dream of working/teaching. I have already done one exam, achieved because I was encouraged by the Centre to do exactly what I wanted.*

Dignity and respect for the learner from the tutors were seen as very important in overcoming the anxieties experienced by adults returning to education. One participant said she came into the group 'like a frightened rabbit'. The support of other women and being part of a lifelong learning culture along with an attitude of 'it can be done' within the group, are key supports to participation.

Training allowances such as those available to participants on FÁS courses would provide financial incentives and concrete support.

Participants talked about the need for different kinds of educational options, both with and without exams, accredited and informal, so that women can choose what suits them best at their particular life stage.

Another community facility, the Sneem Resource Centre, which was developed by the local community when the mobile library was removed, was named as a support for adults in that area.

Impact

> *It has helped me integrate in the community.*

The first impact spoken of was the number and wide range of groups within the SWKA. The groups are seen as crucial in providing social contact and a 'first step' opportunity for women living in rural isolation.

WEI funding has been key in enabling the SWKA to support the growth of women's education in the area. The group spoke of the impact and value of having the Education Co-ordinator in place, how she is known in the local community and can be approached at, for example, the local shop for information about education. It has allowed for vital developmental work to be undertaken, including assessing gaps in local provision, training of trainers for women's education groups, and development of partnerships with the local statutory providers. Sharing premises with local support agencies, as well as the positive attitudes of these agencies, has meant that it has been possible to form really strong and co-operative links.

The provision of the UCC Women's Studies outreach course to some groups is a further valuable development that has enabled women in Kerry to access third-level education. An important aspect of this model of self-directed learning is the flexibility of the course, which allows credits for learning to be accumulated over a variable time period. As in the case of

Donegal, given the remoteness of parts of county Kerry, distance education offers very important possibilities for access to further and higher education.

> *It has familiarised me with women's actual lived experiences, by having to interact and realising that women have a wealth of experience. Education for women uses that experience for their development.*

CASE STUDY 3: LONGFORD TOWN

Longford ICA Federation

> *Improves my self-knowledge and the more I know about myself, the more my confidence grows. Helps me to improve my social skills and enables me to interact easily with groups of people of all interests.*

The Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), founded in 1910, is a national voluntary organisation dedicated to promoting social, economic and personal opportunities for women in rural Ireland. The Longford ICA Federation was established in 1939 and is made up of fifteen local parish groups or guilds and has two hundred and forty members.

The underlying philosophy of the ICA is to combat the social exclusion of women in rural areas. Longford ICA has taken this philosophy to heart and is active in providing women with possibilities for personal growth and the acquiring of skills for income generation. Its actions are informed by knowledge of member's needs, and the considerable experience and expertise gained through provision of services and conducting research.

Since the beginning of the 1990s the group has consistently expanded its role by accessing funding to increase possibilities for education and training for women. This was a direct response to gaps in local adult education provision. Initially, the group's work was facilitated by funding from, for example, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs' grants scheme. Over the years it has also accessed support and funding from a range of other agencies, including the Midland Health Board for counselling services. In 1995 it obtained funding through the EU / NOW programme.

The Focus Group Meeting

Seven members of the group were available to attend the focus group meeting. There was a broad range of experience of adult education, including participation by all of the participants in the UCD/WERRC outreach Certificate in Women's Studies which has been offered in Longford for several years.

Barriers

> *For years I felt that I had no identity other than mother, wife, daughter – I began sentences with 'my husband says'. Eventually I discovered I had ideas which I was now able to express.*

Participants emphasised that the cost, standard and poor provision of childcare pose major barriers to accessing what little education and training there is currently that is in place for women.

Further hurdles discussed by the Longford participants included: absence of information about opportunities and options and lack of an adult education guidance service, which means that women cannot develop an education plan for themselves; the lack of public transport; the cost of courses; the narrow range of adult education and training courses in the formal system, and the absence of third-level institutions in the area. Participants also mentioned social class divisions, how they can be difficult to talk about in rural communities, and their impact on women's participation in courses.

Yet again, women in this focus group spoke about difficulties stemming from women's low self-esteem. They mentioned how women who do not have a supportive partner or family experience barriers even before they leave home, although this opposition, as one woman said, can sometimes be a spur to continue and achieve through a women's group 'against the odds'.

Structural and institutional barriers such as Live Register criteria, the self-financing rule and inflexible administration of budgets, e.g. the ALCES budget, were highlighted as real barriers to participation. Traditional evening classes, fulltime day training courses such as those provided by FÁS, as well as a preference for providing computer training, were all seen as limiting women's participation, and reflecting an attitude which was 'not in tune with the needs of women in the year 2000'.

Supports

> *I am open to learning more and to getting a nice job that I would enjoy with the support from other women.*

The range of strategies needed for participation are the reverse of the barriers as this group perceived the situation. When the group had funding from the NOW initiative, it was able to provide many of these supports, including childcare costs, transport and training. However, without specific funding, it is impossible to continue this level of provision.

The participants went on to discuss the numerous agencies, initiatives and programmes they have had to target over the years in order to run their programmes, stressing the extraordinary amount of time and energy required to do this. A major commitment has to be made by the management group in this kind of situation.

Impact

> *It has made me much more aware of the structural barriers to women's education and training…and of the low participation of women in decision making areas.*

The most powerful – and literally concrete - evidence of the impact of the Longford ICA is that it has succeeded in building Willow House, a permanent Resource Centre. The centre is due to be opened shortly, and will provide information, childcare, counselling and a training space. The building of the centre reflects the very significantly increased opportunities for education and training for women which the group has been successful in developing, despite precarious funding.

The group has had an impact on the life of the area in diverse ways. Recently, for example, Longford ICA ran a course for women who wanted to explore the possibilities for developing small businesses. Out of a group of fifteen women with no previous experience or ideas, ten were ready to set up a business on completion of the course.

Among the other effects and impacts spoken of were changed perceptions of the Longford ICA itself. The group's work in developing and providing education and training for women has meant that the ICA is losing its traditional 'crafts' image.

A number of group members are active in community development groups, and are represented on a range of committees. The members believe that their opinions and experience are at last being taken seriously. From this has come increased self-confidence for women, both individually and collectively.

CASE STUDY 4: WATERFORD CITY

ACCESS 2000 Waterford Ltd.

> *[H]aving left school early and having had a lot of personal difficulties, the course made me aware how well I coped, and made me realise that I had done my best and was proud of myself.*

In 1995 five different women's groups, of which ACCESS 2000 Waterford Ltd. was one, each with its own particular focus, came together to address structural barriers which prevent women from accessing education and training with accredited outcomes. They sought education and training which would take into account the reality of women's lives and which was appropriate to the needs of women working in community based education settings. Working initially with funding under the EU / NOW programme, they designed and developed training modules for their member groups, in partnership with FÁS and the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT).

The training modules included a range of pre-development courses:

- 'Women making Choices' supported by FAS under its Community Response Programme, and accredited by the Open College Network (OCN) UK
- 'Training for Trainers' course, also accredited by the OCN.
- Certificate and a Diploma in Training and Development, accredited by WIT.

The group now has funding from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs for a proportion of its running costs and is in the process of refurbishing its premises in Manor Street to make it more suitable as a learning environment.

The Focus Group Meeting

Seven women attended the focus group meeting, including both course participants and workers involved in the delivery of services.

Barriers

> *It has given me the courage and confidence to do the things I was always told I could not do, or was not intelligent enough to do.*

As well as discussing the recurrent issues such as lack of information, course costs and childcare provision and costs, this group also stressed the negative effect of early experiences of school, the lack of personal confidence, and guilt about taking time for oneself.

The Live Register and how it excludes so many women was seen as a major barrier to women engaging in community education and training, as were the negative or unsupportive attitudes of decision-makers and those in positions of power.

Supports

> *It has given me a new interest. It gave me the chance to get out and do something other than looking after the house and the children. I feel now as if I would like to get some part-time work.*

The location and timing of courses, as much as course content, were highlighted as crucial support factors. Tutors' positive attitudes and skills, study support, and the support of other women in the group were all noted as distinguishing features of education by and for women which encouraged women to take the first step and to progress.

FÁS was named as a source of support by the group. This relates to the history of ACCESS 2000 where the group negotiated allowances for its participants under the Community Response Programme. Other funding supports had been obtained from the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs, and from the NOW Programme and these were recognised as being key to the development of the group.

Impact

> *Being involved has changed my life totally. Before I had my children I would not have thought it possible to return to education, but doing my courses I realised I had the ability.*

Personal development, growth of self-confidence and acquisition of job-seeking skills were highlighted by participants as important personal impacts of the programme. From this confidence and improved self-esteem has come the clear and uncompromising recognition that women have the right to choose the pace of their own development, both in education and in acquiring employment skills. Some members of the group were involved in craft production and the certificates they received and public display of their work were further impacts that cross the personal and community levels.

The Waterford Women's Resource Centre building is an example of impact at community level. As already noted, it is being refurbished at present. This physical structure is a symbol of opportunity for local women and there is a real sense of community ownership. The Ballybeg Women's Group was mentioned specifically in the light of the impact of local women's participation in community development. This group, which was started with the help of a religious sister in the Parish Centre, now has Community Development Programme (CDP) status.

Participants were clear that over recent years, the work of ACCESS 2000 and of the five participating groups in the NOW Project has had a considerable impact on expanding education and training opportunities for women in community settings in the Waterford / Wexford area. Ground-breaking partnerships have now been established with other agencies, and accreditation has been obtained for the training modules from the NCEA and the OCN.

CASE STUDY 5: WEST DUBLIN

A total of three focus group meetings were held for this case study. The groups visited were:

- The Shanty Education and Training Centre
- Clondalkin Women's Network
- Ronanstown Women's Group (with Bawnogue Women's Group)

Both the Ronanstown and Bawnogue Women's Groups are members of the Clondalkin Women's Network.

GROUP 1: THE SHANTY EDUCATION AND TRAINING CENTRE

> *I know if I had not learned to read and write I would have lost out in many areas of my life. I have changed my entire outlook on life. I have learned the meaning of marginalisation, classism, gender inequality. This experience has supported me in a personal and a political way.*

The Shanty Educational Project Ltd., was founded in the late 1980s by two women who set up education and training opportunities for women living in conditions of social and economic disadvantage in West Tallaght. The Shanty philosophy is that education is the key to eradicating poverty and social injustice.

From education courses which began in the living room of these two women's home, the Shanty has grown massively and developed into a multi-dimensional organisation with its own purpose-built centre. From the beginning, the group has fundraised to provide transport, childcare and education without cost to the participants. In 1999, the Shanty's brand-new premises, An Cosán, was opened in Jobstown, Tallaght. The centre includes 'Weaving Dreams', a crafts enterprise; Rainbow House, a childcare centre, and the Shanty itself, the education and training section.

The Focus Group Meeting

> *I spent ten years at home caring for my children. During this time I lost touch with the 'outside world' and lost confidence. The women's group helped me to regain my confidence, develop skills, go back to the workforce and put me in touch with my own creativity.*

Ten women took part in the focus group meeting. They included women who had been involved from the very beginnings of the Shanty project, current participants, and women who had been participants and are now tutors.

Barriers

> *I was very depressed and had no focus for the future. Just being able to get out gave me confidence and skills.*

Stressing once again the central importance of childcare provision, the participants noted that providing childcare means much more than creche provision during times when women are attending courses. The absence of any form of after-school care, and the huge difficulties arising for women in paid work during the school holidays were noted as a major barrier.

The education system itself presents many difficulties for women. The group spoke of the 'antiquated' exam system and the terror it can evoke in adults returning to education. They commented on the absence of recognition in the form of credits for different ways of learning. Participants felt that many training programmes, such as those run by FÁS, fail to recognise the value of the adult education process trainees may have been involved in prior to taking up a training course. Further barriers are created by the difficulties experienced in obtaining recognition for community based training, or with accreditation criteria.

Ignorance, fear, and the emotional costs of participation are significant factors which can inhibit women's participation. Participants also commented on how learning is differently experienced at different points in the life cycle.

Supports

> *It has made me feel a part of something that is so good for everyone and also helps me not to be thinking of my own problems all the time.*

All participants had a strong sense of the uniqueness of 'The Shanty Experience'. They described this as being a holistic approach to women's education, which supports and values every person who comes to the Project for education. Childcare is provided in Rainbow House which also provides care for children with special needs in the locality. Fees are not charged for courses or books and materials, which makes attendance genuinely accessible.

The supportive atmosphere created within the learning group was highlighted. Each class or session begins with what is called an 'opening circle'. This enables women to focus on themselves for the time of the class and to leave life's stresses outside. Each education group has both a tutor and an assistant, which means the tutor has support in picking up any difficulties group members may have. The assistant provides follow up and will make a 'check in' phone call to any woman who may be having problems which affect her attendance. Further support is available through the participants' forum which was set up as a space for learners to discuss their needs.

Many of the women who teach and manage in the Shanty have themselves come through the Project as learners. This allows newcomers to trust the process and is a very encouraging example. The fact that women are allowed and supported to develop at their own pace is also very important.

Other positive factors mentioned were: the voluntary fundraising group, the support of several local political representatives, a range of grants, both large and small, from government departments, local authorities and charitable organisations.

Impact

The development of an holistic approach to adult education, where the adult learner at an individual level is at the centre of a process in which they can grow in learning at a pace that suits them has had an incalculable effect. The approach encourages a positive 'I can do it' sense of self.

A sense of belonging and progression is created through the 'three step programme' which enables learners to follow a leadership training course after a 'first step' personal development course. This is followed by the opportunity to move on, or to give back something to the Project through the range of groups that support the Shanty. The ability to respond to the needs of the local community, is fostered through the 'three step' process and has a tangible impact on the community. As one participant put it:

> *An Cosán are pro-active about change and dealing with the solution rather than becoming bogged down with the problem.*

As already described, the physical structure of An Cosán which provides childcare, enterprise and education has already made a major impact on Jobstown and the surrounding areas. It is a real example of what can be done when a community comes together to respond to a local need. Education and training programmes ranging from literacy to drama and computer studies through to addiction studies and leadership training is available in the heart of this community. Childcare training is a further example of an impact on the local community, where the Shanty set about matching the needs of the local community and the local economy. the Shanty and FÁS have come together to provide accredited training for childcare workers.

GROUP 2: CLONDALKIN WOMEN'S NETWORK

> *It helped me to rediscover the appetite for learning that I possessed but had buried and forgotten. I have an urge to improve myself, to move on to higher paid jobs than I would prior to being a member.*

The Clondalkin Women's Network (CWN) is a network of sixteen women's groups in West County Dublin. It provides a range of supports and services to its member groups under the following headings:

- Outreach
- Training
- Support
- Development
- Networking
- Information provision
- Policy work
- Representation

The Network came together in 1991 and set up formal structures in 1993. Today it has core funding from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. However, this funding does not cover other costs, such as training and research, for which it must access funds from other agencies.

Clondalkin covers a large geographical area of West Dublin. It is made up of a number of neighbourhoods and is itself divided by the Grand Canal and the Cork to Dublin railway line. These divisions create difficulties for easy access to the various services in the area and for movement between housing estates. A considerable number of neighbourhoods within the Clondalkin area have been designated as 'disadvantaged' by the County Dublin Area of Need (CODAN) report.

Clondalkin experienced a rapid growth in housing during the 1980s and early 1990s, without, however, the necessary infrastructure being developed to support the new communities. The 1996 Census of Population gives the population as 57,517, an increase of 30.4% over the ten-year period 1986-1996. This is a far higher rate of change than that of the South Dublin County Council area of 9.6%, or the national average of 2.4%. (Clondalkin Women's Network Ltd. 1999) A vastly increased number of young families on housing estates in the area led to women experiencing isolation and the myriad difficulties that beset new communities. The striking emergence of women's groups in the Clondalkin area during the 1980s was a direct response to women's needs, and also reflected what was happening in many other areas of the country at that time.

Today, the CWN provides a range of practical and strategic supports to its member groups. The groups themselves respond to women's needs in the community in a variety of ways, which include developing and delivering education and training; developing progression routes and accreditation mechanisms and providing childcare. It tackles issues affecting women's lives, such as: health services; poverty; violence against women; employment; drug abuse; transport; accommodation and housing; racism and other forms of discrimination. Through its knowledge and experience, it plays a key role in addressing these issues.

Echoing and supporting the broad remit of its member groups, the Network aims to:

- promote ownership and active participation by women's groups in the Network.
- identify the changing needs of women in Clondalkin on an ongoing basis in order to inform the work of the women's groups and the Network.
- build the capacity of women's groups to respond to the needs of women in Clondalkin at either a local, regional and national level.
- be a voice for women's groups at local, regional and national levels.

Under these four headings, the Network has identified seventeen objectives and the appropriate actions to meet them. (Clondalkin Women's Network Ltd. March 2000)

The Focus Group

> *After being at home with children, it gave me confidence to get out and join other things and through this involvement I got a part-time job.*

Seven women attended the focus group representing four of the member groups. Their responses to the focus group questions reflected a combination of personal experience, knowledge of their respective group and understanding of how the Network operates.

Barriers

As well as discussing the typically mentioned barriers women experience at the first point of entry to community education (i.e. childcare, Live Register discrimination; course costs, premises etc), participants highlighted the personal and individual difficulties women can experience, mentioning for example: fears about being thought foolish, or fears about the inadequacy of their reading and writing skills; the fear partners and children may have that their partners/mother might change as a result of being in an education group.

Time plays a key role in women's lives. They can feel guilty about taking time for themselves and are open to being manipulated by their families as a result. But they also have very little time to call their own and have to fit things in to the short time available between leaving and collecting children from schools or creches. Since their time is so scarce and their responsiblities so numerous, the participants commented that for many women, joining a group does not seem worth the juggling that is involved.

On a collective level, the difficulty of getting new voluntary members, and the danger of the group being seen as an exclusive clique are constant problems. The difficulties that can arise between voluntary and paid workers were also noted.

The Network members specifically mentioned the difficulties members can experience when they are nominated as representatives of their group to local committees and boards. The

CWN has responded to this by running a course in Effective Participation at Local Level, and will shortly publish a training manual on the same topic.

Supports

Major supports identified by the participants were:

- childcare
- subsidised / funded courses
- 'First step' courses

Factors that encourage women to stay with a course were also seen as very important, for example:

- the course co-ordinator
- welcoming atmosphere
- supportive friends and group support
- trust and confidentiality
- being allowed to progress at one's own pace

Impact

> *A fantastic liberation!*

Here again, participants spoke of both the positive impact at a personal level, as well as the benefits felt and experienced at the level of the group and the community more broadly. Having one's opinion valued and listened to, learning not to be judgmental and the growth of awareness and understanding of their communities' needs were all seen as positive and important effects of participation.

The value of the 'collective voice' and the importance of numbers were seen as very significant in terms of community impact. As one woman put it:

> *They have to ask us now!*

The Network enables group members to tap into the experience of other women and the work of other groups, to share information and to learn from each other. This prevents the waste of precious energy in 'reinventing the wheel' in course provision or in addressing some of the obstacles regularly encountered.

Training provided by the Network also has a crucial impact. The Network runs inter-group training in the skills required to operate effectively as a women's group. Recent examples are the provision of courses in: Group Skills; Facilitation and Leadership Skills; and Effective Participation at Local Level. CWN participants identified courses in citizenship as an important means of raising political awareness and overcoming voter apathy both at individual and collective levels.

Having the appropriate forum for debating larger issues was seen as very important. An example was given of how the Network forum provided a member group with the space to explore a local difficulty it was experiencing when similar education provision was being set up close to them. The arrival of this new group, which had resources not available to the voluntary local women's group, threatened its viability. By having a safe supportive place to work out a strategy for negotiation with the new group, possibilities for mutually beneficial co-operation were eventually worked out. The skills acquired through this type of experiential learning has impacts at the wider level of the Network when members' skills and knowledge of negotiation and local politics are developed.

Participants identified a further key issue for Networks and core-funded groups, i.e. the inclusion by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs of the Networks in the Community Development Programme (CDP) structures. They emphasised that further consultation will be necessary to ensure the development of an effective support structure relevant to the needs of Networks and core-funded groups. Consultation with existing groups and Networks is of critical importance in developing support systems and structures.

GROUP 3: RONANSTOWN WOMEN'S GROUP (WITH BAWNOGUE WOMEN'S GROUP)

> *It gave me back myself. Being involved has not only built my self-esteem and confidence. It has encouraged me to retrain myself in an ever-changing society. It has also helped me realise that even though I am rearing a young family, it's never to late to learn or get back in the workforce.*

Ronanstown Women's Group was founded early on in the development of women's daytime community based education in 1984. Located in the greater Clondalkin area, the group is a member of the Clondalkin Women's Network (CWN). Ronanstown has developed a Community Development Programme with funding from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. The group aims to address issues of women's isolation and low self esteem through provision of a welcoming space, and through regular evaluation of programmes to ensure that they are genuinely responsive to the needs of their local members.

For the purpose of the research visit, the Ronanstown group invited members of Bawnogue Women's Group, also located in the greater Clondalkin area, to participate in the focus group discussion. Sixteen women attended the focus group meeting. All were members of either the Ronanstown or Bawnogue groups and all had recently completed the first year of the UCD/WERRC Women's Studies Certificate.

Barriers

> *It has given me great confidence, it has given my dormant brain a kick start, receiving chances I didn't have in earlier years, meeting new people, making new friends and getting fantastic support from other members of the group. Long may it continue – please!*

The barriers included both personal difficulties and those experienced by the group when attempting to provide education for their community. The typical problems were named: childcare, poor transport service, finance, and Live Register discrimination. Literacy was described as a "hidden barrier", and the group discussed the range and levels of literacy difficulties that may prevent women joining an education class.

Yet again, lack of information about educational opportunities and absence of effective progression routes were commented on. Participants discussed the transition from community based courses to third-level education in the context of their and other women's experience in accessing courses both in Tallaght IT and through the outreach programme in the WERRC, UCD Certificate in Women's Studies. The different methods used in third-level teaching can pose problems for women in making the transition. The need for mentoring and counselling support to 'survive' a third level institution was stressed.

The group commented on the lack of respect and recognition for the work of community - based groups. This is a real barrier when it comes to applying for and receiving funding. Agencies often will not support personal development or 'first step' courses, which are so vital for women living in conditions of social and economic disadvantage. Participants spoke too about a bureaucracy that creates barriers, with the funding application procedures of one particular agency (ADM) being described as 'a nightmare'. The group pointed to the irony that procedures are often so complicated that groups seeking funding have to employ a consultant, at considerable cost, to assist them in making funding applications.

Supports

> *Being involved I was able to return to doing NCVA Childcare. The creche belonging to the group minded my child. Being a part of the group has brought many new skills and talents for me.*

The 'door to door' scheme, where members of the group call on women in their homes to to promote what they do, has been very effective.

Childcare, transport, and resources such as suitable buildings, books and equipment, were all mentioned as vital. Mentoring and the support of the learning group were also felt to be key supports, and mentoring is now being built in to the group's Certificate in Women's Studies programme.

The group specifically mentioned support it had obtained from the VEC for their computer studies module, from the local Partnership Company which was open to new ideas, and from the local Jobs Clubs who have given them help with C.Vs and interview skills.

Impact

The Ronanstown Women's Group House, which provides the physical space for local women to meet, attend courses and have a break from caring for children, was seen as crucial, as was the Ronanstown Community Childcare Centre, which was the first purpose-built creche in Dublin and which came about through the work of local women. The importance of the early learning that happens in this childcare facility was discussed, for example, how it offers the possibility of social interaction and the opportunity to learn about differences in terms of family make-up, culture and race.

The broad range of educational options for local women, both formal and informal, which allows women to choose what is most suited to their needs was highlighted. The outreach Women's Studies Certificate, for example, has given women the opportunity to pursue third level studies in their own local community.

Women felt they had gained very significantly in self-confidence as a result of their education work and this had led them to become more involved in their communities in a range of different ways. Women also highlighted the extent to which they have contributed importantly to job creation in their local communities, from providing employment in childcare and tutoring through to the employment of paid workers in the management and delivery of education programmes. This has a 'ripple effect' too on the local economies.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?
An Overview from the Case Studies

Despite differences in the geographic, socio-economic and educational contexts of the groups studied, there was virtually unanimous agreement among participants in the five case studies regarding what needs to change in order for women's needs to be adequately met. These needs can be summarised as 'the three Rs' identified by AONTAS:

- Recognition
- Resources
- Representation

In specific terms, all groups without exception stressed the critical importance of the following:

- childcare
- mainstreamed funding
- accreditation
- progression routes
- resources for capacity building and management/representational skills training
- abolition of the Live Register criteria

Participants in the case studies repeatedly stressed the need for women's community-based education to be recognised in its own right and valued for the vital contribution it has made and continues to make to the well-being of women and the communities they live in, sustain and enrich so significantly.

Participants highlighted the extensive knowledge, expertise and experience that has been built up by groups in the field of education delivery and community participation. They expressed pride in their achievements, and spoke of the satisfaction they felt at seeing women have opportunities to reflect, grow and develop at their own pace and in dignified and appropriate settings.

Anger and dismay were also expressed at the way in which this work has been consistently ignored or marginalised by policy and decision makers, and called for the immediate mainstreaming by statutory providers of the diverse models of good practice developed by local groups and networks. As one participant put it:

> *Now is the time for decisions to be made.*

LOCAL SUPPORT AGENCIES

To complete the case studies, contact was made where possible with representatives of local support agencies, Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and Area-Based Partnership Companies, to explore the same issues as the focus groups, and to seek information on the numbers of women participating in community based education in their areas. Interviews were conducted face to face and by telephone.

Role of Local Support Agencies

Adult Education Organisers (AEOs) are employed in every VEC area and are accountable to the VEC Chief Executive Officer and Adult Education Board in the area. Their role includes provision of information and advice, identification of needs, co-operation with other organisations, organisation of an annual programme and preparation of annual reports. (Conlan 1995)

In 1984 the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) budget was introduced to combat social deprivation and growing unemployment and poverty through adult education. Conlan (1995) claims that as a consequence of the appointment of AEOs, whose sole responsibility was adult education, there was an expansion of provision and development of adult education centres throughout the 1980s. Adult education centres became the 'catalyst for many other initiatives particularly relating to women's groups, daytime provision and often community and economic developments.' (ibid.)

The remit, and consequently the role, of the local Area-Based Partnership Company Education Co-ordinators is somewhat different and the territory covered is not nation-wide as is the case with the AEOs. The Education Co-ordinator reports to both the Manager of the Partnership and to the CEO of the VEC. They have a wide brief, covering primary, secondary and adult education. Their role includes: facilitating education and training providers to respond to the educational needs of unemployed and disadvantaged communities; testing new education initiatives; developing inter-agency and education /training links; and promoting a process of reflection.

VIEWS OF THE LOCAL SUPPORT AGENCIES

1 VECs: Adult Education Organisers (AEOs)

Face to face interviews were held with two AEOs, with a further three interviews being conducted by phone. The interview questions were under the same headings as those used with the groups: barriers and supports to participation; the impact of the group on the local community; and what needs to change. AEOs were also asked about the numbers of women involved in education in their area.

Barriers

Interviews with AEOs show that they recognise the same barriers to participation as do the members of women's community-based education groups. There was a broad consensus that the following issues constitute serious disincentives to women's participation:

- women's low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence
- absence of childcare services
- lack of information and guidance services
- inappropriate timing of classes
- location of education programmes
- unsuitable premises
- distance and transport
- Live Register issues

Supports

The following supports were typically mentioned by AEOs as essential to creating a supportive environment:

- local provision
- childcare
- the right people delivering the services
- funding for day-to-day expenses and teaching hours
- access to computers and equipment

Funding for the construction or acquisition of suitable premises was also recognised as an invaluable support. However, most AEOs did not consider that this type of funding would be generally available.

Impact of Groups

The most common theme under this heading was the development of personal confidence and how this has ripple effects into family and community. There were differences in emphasis on the impact and benefits of this, with one AEO explicitly stating that change occurs at the level of the individual and not at the level of the community. A different view was taken in another region where the AEO could see the impacts beginning at the level of the personal, with women moving into tutoring, and developing their potential for community activism through group involvement. Structural and other supports are, however, of critical importance in ensuring that this can happen. An interesting comment in terms of impact was that a particular local group had 'found a niche in the market' that others had not been able to target.

What needs to change?

The AEOs interviewed agreed that there is urgent and critical need for more resources in terms of finance and staff for the development of community education facilities and programmes. The additional funds for literacy work are welcome, but there is concern that there has been no increase in the community education budget . The need for extra staff was expressed in terms of community education resource people to support the AEOs in their work.

The development of Adult Education Centres was identified as a further need by a number of AEOs. Such centres would provide a significant way forward by providing, among other services, education information and guidance.

Surprisingly, only one AEO identified the poor representation of women on Local Development Boards and Committees as an area requiring action for change. .

Overview

The AEOs were unable to provide information about the numbers of women participating in adult/community education in their area, or about the area's socio-economic profile. While in some cases they had sought to gather data, staff resources for this were not available. This is a surprising lapse, since the specific duties of an AEO includes the following responsibilities:

- to identify out-of-school and part-time educational needs of the scheme area
- to monitor and be accountable for the existing provision of courses and facilities
- to prepare an annual report on the out-of-school and part-time education programme for the V.E.C. and the Minister for Education and Science

(Information supplied by the Further Education Section, Department of Education and Science)

It is difficult to see how Adult Education Organisers can carry out their brief without the necessary resources to do so.

Overall, based on the findings of the field work for this research, it is our view that the degree of support given by AEOs to women's community-based education is highly variable. Much appears to depend on the interest and commitment of the individual AEO, which may in turn be influenced by the membership of the local VEC Board and by the perspective of the CEO. While some AEOs are very supportive of community-based education for women and pro-active regarding its development, others exhibited poor knowledge of the sector, and expressed negative or occasionally hostile views about the value of the work undertaken by local groups.

2 Area-Based Partnership Companies: Education Co-ordinators

Six local Partnership Company Education Co-ordinators were interviewed for the research. Two interviews were held face to face with the other four being conducted by phone.

The Partnership Education Co-ordinators' Mission Statement states that they will:

> [Co-ordinate] the development of local innovative and co-ordinated responses to education and training needs of unemployed people and disadvantaged communities. This will be achieved through networking with relevant providers, agencies, local communities and individuals.

(Information supplied by Area Development Management.)

Barriers

Here again, the Education Co-ordinators listed the familiar barriers identified by the focus groups and the AEOs: lack of childcare; funding; transport; lack of information and guidance; inappropriate provision and delivery methods, and the absence of a system of accreditation for prior learning or of clear progression routes for adult learners. As one Education Co-ordinator phrased it, while women now have increased opportunities for 'first step' or entry point courses, for too many of them:

> *The starting point can become the staying point.*

In relation to childcare, one of the Education Co-ordinators noted that women were often experiencing this barrier for the second time, as young grandmothers, carrying the burden of supporting daughters and sons in the labour force.

Considering the broader context, the 'territorial attitudes' of some providers, and the lack of communication and co-operation between them were cited as militating against the richer development of community education services and supports. Concern was expressed that there has been a failure both to integrate services and to place the needs of the learner at the centre of policy development.

Education Co-ordinators also commented on ongoing debates on the definition of 'disadvantage' and strategies to overcome it. They stressed that combating disadvantage is 'slow work', requiring far greater resources than are currently allocated. The difficulty of convincing other agencies of the value of community-based education work was also noted.

Supports

Given their remit and the considerable flexibility of their brief, Education Co-ordinators have been able to respond quickly to new needs and projects and to network with a diverse range of agencies and groups to provide supports. Initiatives specifically mentioned included: funding for childcare for women attending a third level course; family literacy schemes in co-operation with the VEC; and support for training for carers in co-operation with the local Health Board.

The targeting of women with particular educational needs was also raised. One Education Co-ordinator, describing an initiative targeting Traveller women, pointed out that it is not enough to advertise a class in basic education, for example. A more pro-active and developed approach needs to be made to engage the target group. In this particular instance, the women were invited first to a social setting, and gradually as trust was built up, educational activities were introduced.

The links with the women's networks were seen as very important, because of the networks' extensive local knowledge and experience, and their commitment to fighting for rights and services for their communities. The appointment of paid workers in the networks (or in other kinds of groups) facilitated communication and co-operation between the community education base and the Partnership Companies.

Impact of the Groups

Education Co-ordinators mentioned a number of crucial impacts on both the personal and collective levels, noting that groups:

- provide fora for reflection and discussion of community needs
- increase community capacity for 'problem-solving' in dealing with difficult issues such as domestic violence and persistent poverty
- enhance access to and circulation of information about community and statutory services
- challenge apathy in communities
- facilitate women's movement into decision-making fora.
- provide physical space (often in new buildings) for women to organise, learn and enhance their skills and capacities.

What needs to change :

There was wide agreement on the following issues as crucial to development of the community education sector:

- recognition of prior learning
- support for part-time study
- integration of services to ensure less overlap and better delivery of education and training
- mainstreaming of both funding and a variety of programmes
- more flexible approaches from the statutory providers (FÁS, VECs, and LES)
- increased resources for the entire community education sector, from literacy work through to the development of local learning centres
- resources to support the develoment and provision of distance learning

Overview

Education Co-ordinators communicate a strong sense of energy and enthusiasm for their work, and generally have an informed understanding of the major issues and challenges involved in working in and developing women's community based education. Their particular brief is to target disadvantage and, up to a point, they have been given the resources to do so. Although their remit covers the broad educational spectrum, they have supported a diverse range of initiatives with and for women's community based education on the basis that the work accomplished by these local groups is a critical element in the strategy to combat poverty and disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

While the groups researched for these case studies have grown and developed over the years, it is clear that this is due to the remarkable vision, commitment and determination of the women involved with each project. In large part, this extraordinary work has been carried out on a volunteer basis by women who have ceaselessly struggled for recognition of and mainstreamed support for the vital contribution made by community based education to the lives of individual women and to the communities of which they are a part.

Groups had received funding support from a diverse range of agencies, including the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, Health Boards, Partnership Companies and, to a lesser extent, FÁS. In some cases, there had been support from third-level institutions, although generally because of the commitment of individuals and specific departments rather than as a result of third-level policy. The Department of Education and Science was seldom mentioned as a source of support, except with regard to WEI funding, and support in a limited number of locations from VEC structures.

There was little evidence in the case study areas of the adult education centres Conlan (1995) refers to as providing a 'catalyst [for] women's groups'. The evidence of this research is that the real catalyst for educational initiatives, and the motivation and commitment to developing and sustaining them, comes directly from women's community-based groups and networks themselves.

The case studies amply confirm the findings of much previous research in this field:

- Women's community education is a vital arena for the development of women's sense of themselves as valuable and important members of Irish society.
- The Networks play a key role in supporting and strengthening women's capacity to participate in education and to contribute pro-actively to their communities and regions.

The contribution made by this vibrant and still growing sector to challenging and combating poverty, marginalisation and exclusion is difficult to quantify because that contribution is literally 'incalculable'. The results are nonetheless strikingly tangible and visible in myriad ways, personal, familial and collective, in many kinds of communities and in widely diverse locations throughout the country.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions and Recommendations

CONCLUSIONS

- Tens of thousands of women, primarily in disadvantaged communities, benefit from community-based educational opportunities every year in Ireland.

- Women's community-based education has played, and continues to play, a central role in supporting women at community level to combat disadvantage and poverty.

- Women participants in community education cross a spectrum of different age groups, social classes and geographical areas.

- Women's community-based education has been a major growth area within adult education over the past ten years but has received little recognition and few resources.

- Barriers to women's participation in community education are primarily the under-resourcing of appropriate support services, particularly childcare and transport, together with a lack of personal confidence and experience linked to women's traditional domestic roles and responsibilities and wider cultural attitudes.

- Women's groups engaged in the provision of women's community-based education are under-represented in the decision-making systems and structures affecting their area of work.

- Representation of women in decision-making structures affecting community education and community development needs to be established through both the practical commitment and implementation of gender-balance and also through the direct representation of women's interests within Local Adult Learning Boards, the National Adult Learning Council and other relevant structures at local level, e.g. VEC, County Development Boards, Health Boards and other structures.

- There is a need for a properly funded specialist support structure for women's community-based education which would support both local groups and regional networks with the aim of strengthening capacity-building of local groups, exchange of information and experiences between groups and greater input into policy and decision-making.

- Flexibility in the provision of women's community-based educational activities is critical to women - this arises in relation to the timing, fees, location, and structure of courses.

- Women consistently emphasise the significance of community education to their personal development, participation in community activities and in their capacity to access further educational, training and employment opportunities.

- Women's participation in community education is frequently linked to their wider participation in community development activity.

- There is a huge variation in the level of support to women's community education within the adult education system, often attributable to the level of commitment and understanding of key individuals.

- A number of government departments are involved in funding education and education-related activities at community level, for example direct funding of women's groups, course provision, buildings, childcare and other support services. There is a lack of co-ordination on an inter-departmental level, leaving women's groups in a situation of dealing with a range of statutory agencies and a fragmented funding structure. Departments of Education and Science, Social Community and Family Affairs, Justice Equality & Law Reform and Health are the main departments involved.

- It is essential that the process by which community education funds are allocated and distributed be subject to full public accountability through a system of publicly available and widely disseminated information and the establishment of clear criteria for project and group selection.

- Physical resources - buildings and equipment - are frequently crucial to the sustainability of women's community-based education projects.

- Women's community-based education draws on innovative participative approaches to learning, providing new models of best practice which have been extremely effective in supporting women through an extended process of education.

- Women participants in community education are very concerned with the establishment of pathways to accreditation linked to progression routes which would facilitate their access to further skills and qualifications.

- Eligibility criteria for entry to educational programmes that use the Live Register as an access requirement continue to act as a significant barrier to women's increased access to such programmes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a need for core funding for women's community-based education which would allow for continuity and security in the provision and delivery of these essential educational services. Such core funding will require the establishment of an inter-departmental structure, bringing together government departments that currently have parallel responsibilities for funding education and education-related activities at community level : Departments of Health, Education and Science, Social Community and Family Affairs and Justice Equality and Law Reform.

2. Funding for women's community based education involves the resourcing of women's groups and regional networks through direct core funding as well as the development of a system of supports and support services covering :

- materials support
- mentoring system
- premises
- childcare
- transport

3. There is an urgent need to resource and develop a comprehensive support structure for women's community education groups and networks. In this context, a specific unit within the newly proposed Community Education Technical Support Unit should be established with a specific remit towards women's community based education. This support structure should operate at a regional level and have four specific functions :

- facilitating capacity-building of local groups
- supporting the exchange of experience and information between local groups and networks
- developing the capacity of local groups and regional networks to contribute to, and influence policy-making
- supporting the participation of women's groups and networks in decision-making structures affecting community education and community development.

4. Key government departments, specifically the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs need to establish a definite policy and structured support for women's community-based education.

5. Specific measures need to be taken to provide for greater representation of women within decision-making structures affecting community-based education, particularly the newly proposed National Adult Learning Council, the Local Adult Learning Boards and among Local Community Education Facilitators. This should involve :

- implementation in practice of government guidelines on gender-balance i.e. minimum 40% representation of women and men.
- direct representation of women's interests on key local development structures.
- nominating procedure which would prioritise representation of groups and networks directly involved in women's community-based education.
- gender-proofing of all policy decisions and action plans at local, regional and national levels.

6. Procedures should immediately be put in place to establish accountability and transparency in the allocation of community education funds. These should involve :

- public announcement and advertisement by Local Adult Learning Boards of the existence of community education funds.
- publication by Local Adult Learning Boards of the criteria for selection of projects and groups for funding.
- production of Annual Reports by Local Adult Learning Boards specifying the projects funded with a brief description such projects, the amount they received and a profile of the beneficiaries of the expenditure.

7. A comprehensive system for the accreditation of women's community-based education should be established between the National Qualifications Authority and the National Adult Learning Council which would be based on :

- recognition of prior learning
- structured system for accumulation of recognised credits
- flexible accumulation of credits
- definite progression routes within the formal educational systems at both second and third levels.

8. There is a need to review the current structure of funding for childcare services with a view to ensuring greater flexibility in the provision of accessible, funded childcare services, particularly in rural areas.

9. Greater provision for a wider range of care services at community level requires to be developed urgently so as to enable women to access education, training and employment opportunities.

10. Community-based transportation services need to be developed in a comprehensive manner, particularly in rural areas, which operate in a flexible way based on an analysis of local needs, including the needs of women accessing community-based education.

11. Data on women's economic and social disadvantage and poverty need to be collected and reviewed on a regular basis in consultation with women's groups and organisations.

12. Providers of community-based education need to take a pro-active role in circulating information about course availability and in targeting disadvantaged women within a particular area.

13. Future provision of women's community education will need to develop a new focus on specific groups of women, for example older women, ethnic minority women and other social and goegraphical groups with specific needs.

14. Further research should be carried out, particularly on the long-term impact on women's economic and social position of their participation in community-based education. This would involve a longitudinal study tracking the situation of women today who were involved in women's community-based education ten, fifteen and twenty years ago.

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APPENDIX 1

RESEARCH PROJECT TEAM

Project Team Contracting Organisation :

Women's Education Research and Resource Centre, University College Dublin.

WERRC was established in 1990 and has developed into a key Centre for research and education on economic and social policy towards women in Ireland as well as a unique and innovative provider of a range of community-based outreach courses in Women's Studies and of degree, diploma and postgraduate courses in Women's Studies within the University. WERRC has played a central role in fostering and developing feminist education at local and community level, and has piloted the establishment of partnerships with locally- and community-based women's groups to develop courses based on the specific needs of different groups and communities. WERRC applies a feminist empowerment approach and strategy to women's community education.

Research Project Team

Project Director : Ailbhe Smyth

Director of WERRC, Senior Lecturer and Researcher.

Ailbhe Smyth has been Director of the Women's Education, Research and Resource Centre at University College Dublin since 1990. The major focus of her academic work is on the contemporary socio-political and cultural realities of women's lives and their interactions with the State, chiefly in Ireland. She has researched and written extensively on gender issues in relation to a range of topics including human and civil rights, equality and political participation, the legal and judicial systems, reproductive rights and politics, as well as on Women's Studies and women's education. As Director of WERRC, she initiated and developed WERRC as a multidisciplinary Centre for education and research and established the groundbreaking outreach programme of women's community-based feminist education, the UCD Certificate in Women's Studies. Ailbhe Smyth has served on a wide range of state and semi-state committees and as a consultant on gender and equality issues in Ireland and abroad, working with the EU, universities, community groups, trades unions and women's organisations. She is also a member of the Higher Education Authority, a Trustee of the National Library and Co-Chair of the National Lesbian and Gay Federation.

Project Director : Ursula Barry

Ursula Barry, Lecturer and Researcher, WERRC.

Ursula Barry has twenty years experience as a researcher and policy analyst and has published extensively in the areas of equality, and in particular, gender equality in Ireland. In the last five years, she has carried out a number of research projects on gender equality in Ireland including research on mainstreaming gender equality in local development, equality data issues, women and local development, the system of provision of care in Ireland and the pattern of women's employment, the implementation of gender equality guidelines by Area

Development Management, an assessment of gender equality policy in the Irish Employment Action Plan and a review of Gender Impact assessment in Ireland. Ursula recently directed a Programme of Awareness and Training for Irish policy makers on gender mainstreaming and the Irish National Development Plan. She represents women's interests on a wide range of national and EU policy arenas including the EU Gender and Employment Network, the National Economic and Social Forum and the Monitoring Committee on the Social Economy. She is a also a member of the Equality Authority Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Lesbians and Gay Men.

Kay Bailey : Researcher – Fieldwork

Independent consultant currently attached to Ruhama Women's Project.

Kay Bailey has been active in Adult Education since the mid 1980s. For ten years she was a member of the management group of Dundrum Adult Training and Education (DATE) During this period she served on the Executive Committee of AONTAS for three years, representing the interests of adult learners and chaired the Adult Community Education (ACE) Network for two years. Recognising the need for information sharing and the support of daytime education groups Kay was one of a small group of women who initiated publication of two self-help packs and the first piece of research into the development of the groups. These were the 'Information Pack for Daytime Adult Education Groups' in 1990, the updated version, the 'AONTAS / NOW Daytime Education Pack' in 1996 and "Liberating Learning" in 1993. More recently Kay has worked with AONTAS in their Information Service and for the Shanty Educational Project in researching funding opportunities. She has been studying for a Master's in Equality Studies in UCD and is currently employed in the Ruhama Women's Project in education support work.

Margaret Martin : Research Consultant

Training and Educational Consultant with specific expertise on women.

Margaret Martin has twenty years experience of working in adult education. In the late 1980s she became Ireland's first Development Officer for Women's Education and worked closely with marginalised and educationally disadvantaged women. She led the team that developed the first Irish training manual for women's education groups. During her time as Head of the AONTAS Information Service she gained wide experience of the needs and concerns of adult learners. She initiated and co-wrote a series of leaflets designed to respond to these needs. As Deputy Director of AONTAS she was involved in policy and representation work on Governmental and multi-agency committees. For the past three years she has been working on a cross border project with is delivering a women's political development project. She has published and edited manuals and guidebooks for women's groups, adult learners and mature students in such areas as programme development and group facilitation.

Annie Dillon : Member of Research Management Team

Certificate Co-ordinator and Development Officer, WERRC, UCD

Annie Dillon has qualifications in nursing, midwifery, management and adult education and has an MA in Women's Studies. She is currently employed by UCD as the WERRC Certificate Co-ordinator and Outreach Development Officer and has been a tutor on the Women's Studies Certificate programme for the past 5 years. Annie has a background in women's community health and education with experience in Ireland, Britain and Australia. She has worked with women's community groups developing and delivering women's health education programmes and has been involved in setting up services and resources for counselling and health education for women. She is involved in policy development and submissions to government, such as the women's health policy and the Green Paper on Adult Education. As the WERRC Certificate co-ordinator and outreach development officer, Annie Dillon works in partnership with women's community groups to develop and deliver needs based curriculum for women's studies outreach Certificate programmes.

Elizabeth Crean : Research Administrator

Administrator of Certificate/Outreach Programme, WERRC, UCD

Elizabeth Crean is a graduate of the MA Women's Studies programme in WERRC and has wide-ranging experience as an organiser of events attached to the Centre and administrator of research and other projects. Since 1999 Elizabeth has worked full-time as the administrator of the Certificate programme in WERRC, with a particular focus on outreach community-based women's education.

APPENDIX 2

FIELDWORK MATERIALS

INTERVIEWS WITH POLICY MAKERS

Interviews were held with representatives of key policy-making agencies during June, July and August 2000

June Meehan, Combat Poverty Agency
Tina Stallard and Mary Kennedy, Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs
Mary Beggan and Linda Conway, FAS
Margaret Kelly, Department of Education and Science
Bernie Judge, Area Development Management Ltd.
Joe Allen, Department of the Environment
Berni Brady and Maureen Kavanagh, AONTAS

Schedule of interview questions

1 Describe your agency's current role with regard to women's community-based education.

2 What importance does your agency attach to this sector in policy and budgetary terms?

3 Your views on the current state of the women's community-based education sector in relation to scale of provision and range of services relative to needs.

4 Describe your agency's development plans with regard to the sector.

5 What would constitute, in your view, appropriate representation mechanisms for women involved in the sector on policy and implementation bodies?

6 Is there a case in your view for specifically targeted support (measures and/or funding) for this sector?

WERRC Research into Women's Community Education Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions which are to gather information about why women become involved in community-based education initiatives.

All answers are confidential and no names are needed in this questionnaire.

1) Are you: *(please tick which)*

full-time in the home. ☐
self-employed. ☐
in part-time paid work. ☐
in full-time paid work. ☐
in receipt of social welfare. ☐

Would you like to get a job or improve your job prospects? Yes ☐ No ☐

Has being involved in your education group encouraged you to apply for paid work?

Yes ☐ No ☐

2) Do you live in an urban or rural area? urban ☐ rural ☐

Do you own your own home? Yes ☐ No ☐

Are you renting accommodation? Yes ☐ No ☐

If so, are you in receipt of rent allowance? Yes ☐ No ☐

3) Are you involved in other community activities?
For example *(please tick which may apply)*

School parent's association ☐
Women's group ☐
Residents' association ☐
Youth group ☐
Sports group ☐
Political Party ☐
Partnership Board ☐
Any other, please describe ______________________________

____

Has being involved in your education group encouraged you to get involved in any of the groups named above? Yes ☐ No ☐

4) Can you say what brought you to your group? *(please tick all the statements which apply to you.)*
Was it to:

get out of the house. ☐
make new friends. ☐
develop your interests. ☐
improve your reading and writing skills. ☐
to help with your children's education. ☐
to get a qualification / certificate. ☐
any other reason, please describe ______________________________

____

When did you finish school:

after primary school ☐
before the Inter/Junior Cert. ☐
after the Inter/Junior Cert. ☐
after the Leaving Cert. ☐

Would you like to go further with your education / training? Yes ☐ No ☐

5) How has being involved in this group made a difference in your life?

THANK YOU

If you have any suggestions on how this questionnaire could be improved please let us know.

SCHEDULE OF FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- What would you say, has been the impact of women's community-based education programmes on the social, economic and political life in the area?

- What do you see as the main barriers to women's participation in education programmes, in paid work and in community activity?

- What do you see as the main supports for the above?

- What needs to be changed in order to improve the situation as you see it?

Five years ago there were six or seven women's groups in west Sligo and north Mayo, whereas now there are 25. Five years ago we did not have a dentist in Belmullet, and now we have a Western Health Board women's health plan, osteoporosis screening and, most recently an excellent conference in Westport on violence against women which was attended by all the official bodies.

Marion Flannery

A number of group members are active in community development groups, and are represented on a range of committees. The members believe that their opinions and experience are at last being taken seriously. From this has come increased self-confidence for women,
both individually and collectively.

Longford ICA

An Cosán are pro-active about change and dealing with the solution rather than becoming bogged down with the problem.

Shanty Educational Project

AONTAS
National Association of Adult Education
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Tel: 01 475 4121/475 4122 Fax: 01 478 0084
e-mail: mail@aontas.com
website: www.aontas.com

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